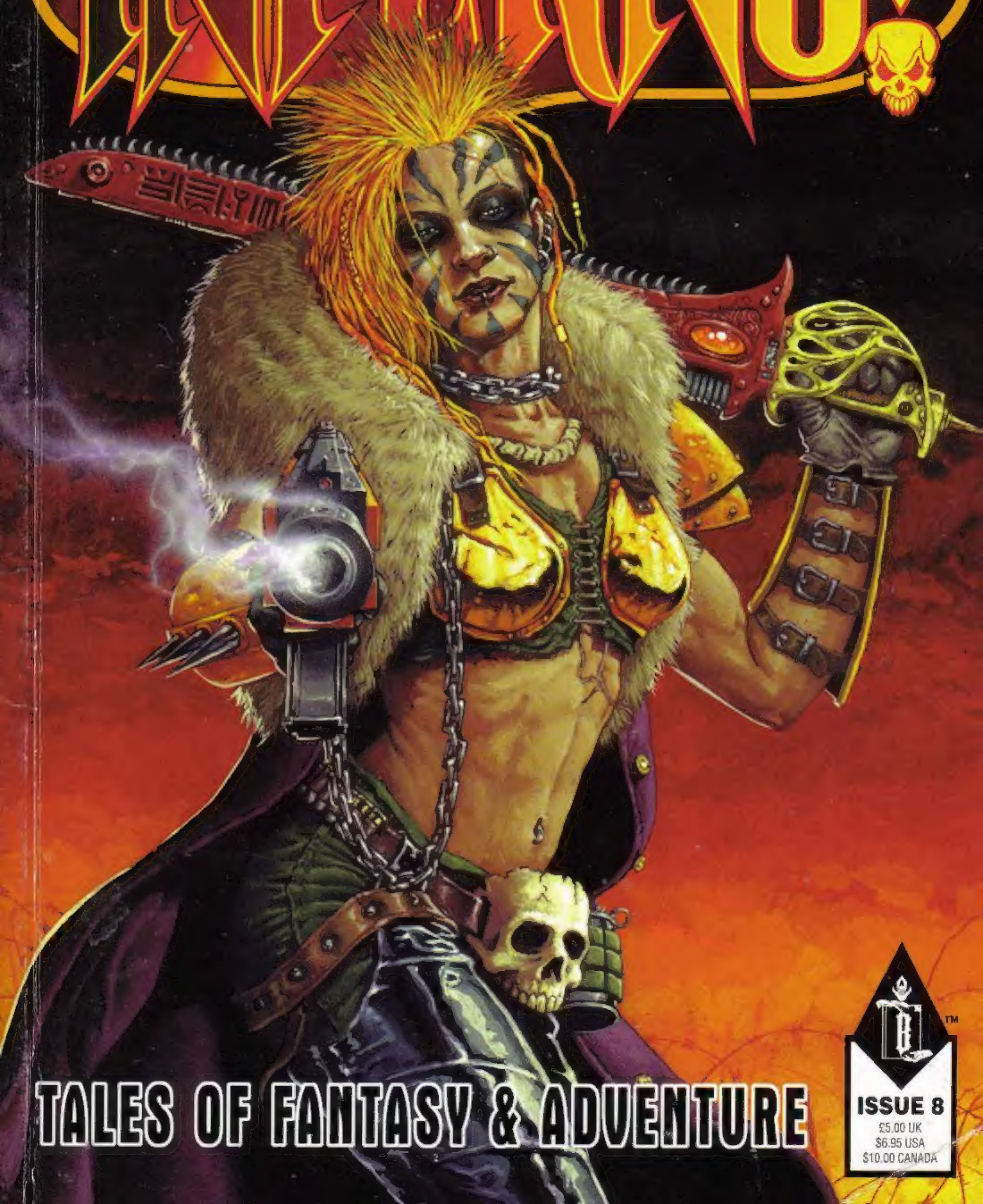


INFERNO!



TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE



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Lady Yolanda Catallus of Necromunda, in her full 'Outlands Annie' gear. This is actually the first ever gouache painting by Karl Kopinski; you'll have seen his portraits in earlier volumes of *Inferno!*, and Karl has a regular gig in *Warhammer Monthly* comic,

SO WHAT DOES the word *Inferno!* conjure up then? Late nights reading version fifteen of Gav Thorpe's latest story in order to hit a print deadline is perhaps the most honest reply, but that's not the answer I'm looking for. No, *Inferno!* means flames, fire, hot burny death (and not a curry in sight), scorching eternal doom in the pit of... but you get the message. What it doesn't mean is neat chrome letters and a red background.

'Erm, er... what?' I hear you ask. 'What is he on about now? Has he become some kind of vindaloo evangelist?' Open your eyes, look at the cover again – we've got a swanky new logo! Note the spiky letters, the fiery colours, the... well, it looks ace, doesn't it? Much grimmer, much more *us*.

The cover illustration isn't so shabby either, depicting what could perhaps be

where Yolanda has appeared. It gave the plucky artist a few problems – he didn't realise that gouache never really dries solid, so his tendency to dribble whilst painting caught him out once or twice. Still, it turned out nice in the end.

ACTUALLY, WHILE we're talking about cover paintings, it has been mentioned to me by one particular heretic who shall remain nameless (and shortly lifeless) that our splendid cover illustrations rarely relate to any actual story or feature in the issue of *Inferno!* itself. This might be in part due to me! I just like brilliant pictures on the covers, and it never occurred to me that some of you might want a tie in with what's happening inside. Well, actually I suppose each cover could be said to be tied in to some extent: we tend to depict something with either a gun, axe, chainsaw or just big teeth, looming menacingly with bad intent, on the cover of each volume of *Inferno!* – and most of these are bound to feature somewhere in our blood-soaked pages. Joking apart, an interesting point has been raised. If you think that our covers should illustrate a specific story or feature in the magazine, then do let me know. I like getting post.

In the meantime, I leave you in the capable hands of Commissar Gaunt and his Ghosts, as we kick off with Dan Abnett's latest action-packed offering, *The Hollows of Hell...*

Andy Jones
Editor



Write to us at — Inferno!, The Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK or email publishing@games-workshop.co.uk



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EDITOR

Andy Jones

WRITERS

Dan Abnett
Jonathan Curran
Simon Jowett
David Pugh
Gordon Rennie

ARTISTS

Wayne England
Mark Gibbons
John Hicklenton
Logan Lubera
Percy Melbye
David Pugh
Jeff Rebner
Craig Yeung

PRODUCTION

Marc Gascoigne
Ian Pickstock

ADMINISTRATION

Lesley Johnson

THANK YOU

Cath Green

COVER

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by Karl Kopinski

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GAUNT'S GHOSTS THE HOLLOWS OF HELL BY DAN ABNETT

THE MANUFACTURING *bives* of Caligula became the focus of a major Imperial push late in the eleventh year of the Sabbat Worlds Campaign. If the Imperial Crusade was to succeed in its liberation of the occupied sectors of the Segmentum Pacificus, it needed tactical fabrication centres such as Caligula free to act as frontline resupply depots.

High Commander Macaroth committed a vast invasion force to retake Caligula from the embrace of Cbaos, deploying almost nine million Imperial Guards, assisted by two entire Space Marine chapters, in a devastating orbital assault. Fighting centred on six main hive cities, vast technarchies built inside massive natural calderas. Combat was intense and losses were high. It is estimated that twenty-nine percent of the attacking Imperium force was destroyed before it even reached the battle zone...

— from *A History of the Later Imperial Crusades*

DAY TWO EIGHTY-SEVEN, CALIGULA LOW ORBIT

HE WOULD be sick. Very soon, very violently. Of this sole fact, Brin Milo was absolutely sure. His stomach somersaulted as the troopship plunged out of the sky, and every bone in his body shook as the impossibly steep descent vibrated the sixty ton vessel like a child's rattle.

Count... think happy thoughts... distract yourself... counselled a part of his mind in desperation. *It won't look good if the Commissar's aide, the Tanith First-and-Only's Regimental piper, wonderboy and all round lucky bloody charm hurls his reconstituted freeze-dried ready-pulped food rations all over the deck.*

And whatever you do, don't think about how pulpy and slimy those food rations were... advised another, urgent part of his brain.

Deck? What deck? wailed another. *Spew now and it'll wobble out in free fall and—*

Shut up! Brin Milo ordered his seething imagination.

For a moment, he was calm. He breathed deeply to loosen and relax, to centre himself, as Trooper Larkin had taught him during marksman training. Then a tiny little black-hearted voice in his head piped up: *Don't worry about puking. You'll be incinerated in a hypervelocity crash-landing any second now.*

LIKE PEPPER *falling from a mill*, thought Executive Officer Kreff, gazing down out of the vast observation blister below the prow of the escort frigate *Navarre*.

Behind him, on the raised bridge, there was a murmur as the systems operators and servitors softly relayed data back and forth. Control systems hummed in harmony with the prayers of the tech-priests. The air was cool. Occasionally, the low, reverential voices of the senior helm officers would announce another order from the ship's Captain, who lurked alone, inscrutable, in his private strategium, an armoured dome at the heart of the bridge.

The frigate's bridge was Kreff's favourite place in the Universe. It was hushed like a chapel, and always serene, even though it controlled a spaceship capable of crossing parsecs in a blink, a craft with the firepower to roast entire cities. He returned to his study of the vast bright bulk of Caligula below him, plump and puffy like an orange, flecked with white-green blotches of mould.

Imperial craft hung in the blackness between it and him: some vast, grey and vaulted like cathedrals ten miles long, some bloated like oceanic titans, some long, lean and angular like his own frigate. They floated in the sea of space and tiny black dots, thousands upon thousands of dots, tumbled out of them, fluttering down towards the ripe planet.

Kreff knew the dots were troop ships: each speck was a sixty-ton dropship loaded with combat-ready troops. But they looked just like pepper ground from a mill. As if the Imperial fleet had come by to politely season Caligula.

Kreff wondered which of the pepper grains contained Commissar Gaunt. Things had certainly livened up since Gaunt had arrived: Ibram Gaunt, the notorious, decorated war hero, and the rag-tag

regiment known as the Ghosts that he had salvaged from the murdered planet, Tanith.

Kreff smoothed the emerald trim of his Segmentum Pacificus Fleet uniform and sighed. When he first heard the *Navarre* had been assigned to Gaunt's mob, he'd been dismayed. But true to his reputation, Gaunt had shaped the so-called Ghosts up and taken them through many courageous actions.

It had been an education having him aboard. As Executive Officer, the official representative of the Captain in all shipboard organisational matters, he had had to mix with the Ghosts more than other Navy personnel. He'd got to know them – as well as any one could know a band of black-haired, raucous, tattooed soldiers, the last survivors from a planet that Chaos had destroyed. He'd been almost afraid of them at first, alarmed by their fierce physicality. Kreff knew war as a silent, detached, long-distance discipline, a chess game measured in thousands of miles and degrees of orbit. They knew war as a bloody, wearying, frenzied, close-up blur.

He'd been invited to several dinners in the Guard mess, and spent one strange, only partially-remembered evening in the company of Corbec, the Regiment's Colonel, a hirsute giant of a man who had, on closer inspection, a noble soul. Or so it had seemed after several bottles and hours of loose, earnest talk. They had debated the tactics of war, comparing their own schools and methods. Kreff had been dismissive of Corbec's brutal, primitive ethos, boasting of the high art that was Navy Fleet Warfare. Corbec had not been insulted. He'd grinned and promised Kreff would get to fight a *real war* one day.

The thought made Kreff smile. His eyes went back to the dots falling towards the planet and the smile faded. Now he doubted he'd see Gaunt or Corbec again. Far away, below, he could see the scorching flashes of anti-orbit guns, barking up at the fluttering pepper grains. That was a dog's life, going down there into the mouth of hell. All that noise and death and mayhem.

Kreff sighed again, and felt suddenly grateful for the tranquil bridge around him. This was the *only* way to fight wars, he decided.

MILO OPENED his eyes, but it hadn't gone away. The world was still

convulsing. He glanced about, down the hold of the troop ship where another twenty-five Guardsmen sat rigid, clamped in place by the yellow-striped restraint rigs, their equipment shuddering in mesh packs under every seat. Milo heard the roaring of the outer hull, white-hot from the steep dive. What he couldn't hear was the booming cough of the anti-orbit batteries down below, welcoming them.

He glanced around for a friendly face. Hulking Bragg was gripping his restraints tight, his eyes closed. Young Trooper Caffran, only three years older than Milo, was gazing at the roof, muttering a charm or prayer. Across from him, Milo found the hard eyes of Major Rawne.

Rawne smiled and nodded his head encouragingly.

Milo took a breath. Being encouraged by Major Rawne in these circumstances was like being patted on the back by one of the Dark Gods themselves.

Milo shut his eyes again.

IN THE REAR of the slender cockpit, strapped in his ancient, creaking leather g-chair, Commissar Gaunt craned his neck round to see past the pilots and the Astropath and look through the narrow front ports. Chart displays flickered across the thick glass, and the ship was bucking wildly, but Gaunt could see the target coming up: the hive city called Nero, poking up out of the ochre soil through a caldera seventy miles wide, like an encrusted lump of coal set in a plump navel.

'Sixty seconds to landfall,' the pilot said calmly. His voice was electronically tonal as it rasped via the intercom.

Gaunt pulled out his bolt pistol and cocked it. He started counting down.

HIGH ABOVE the sunken city of Nero, the troop ships came down like bullets, scorching in out of the cloud banks. Anti-air batteries thumped the sky.

Then the cotton-white clouds began to singe. The fluffy corners scorched and wilted. A dark purple stain leached into the sky, billowing through the cumulus like blood through water. Lightning fizzed and lashed.

Miles above, Kreff paused and stared. Something was discolouring the atmosphere far below.

'What the—' he began.

‘WEATHER formation!’ yelled the co-pilot, frantically making adjustments. ‘We’re hitting hail and lightning...’

Gaunt was about to query further, but the shaking had increased. He glanced round at the Astropath, suddenly aware that the man was uttering a low, monotone growl like a cornered mastiff. He was just in time to see the Astropath’s head explode. Blood and tissue painted the pilot, co-pilot, Gaunt and the entire cabin interior.

The pilot was screaming a question.

It was a psychic storm, Gaunt was horribly sure. Far below them, something of unimaginable daemonic power was trying to keep them out, trying to ward off the assault with a boiling tempest of Chaos.

The ship was shaking so hard now that Gaunt could no longer focus. Multiple warning runes flashed up in series across the main control display, blurring into scarlet streaks before his rattling eyes.

SOMETHING, somewhere exploded. The vibration and the shrieking didn’t stop, but they changed. Milo suddenly knew that they were no longer crash diving into attack. They were simply crash diving.

He wasn’t feeling sick anymore. But the wicked incinerated-in-a-hypervelocity-crashlanding-voice started to crow *I told you so*.

THERE WAS IMPACT... so huge, it felt like every one of his joints had dislocated.

There was sliding...

... sudden, shuddering, terrifying.

And finally...

... there was roaring fire.

And, as if as an afterthought...

... complete excruciating blackness.



DAY TWO EIGHTY-SEVEN, NERO HIVE DROPZONE

HUNDREDS OF Imperial troopships were already well below the cloud bank when the psychic typhoon exploded into life, and so escaped the worst of its effects. Levelling out, they descended on the massive citadel like a swarm of insects. The air was thick with them, ringing with the roar of their thrusters as they banked in and settled like locusts on the wasteland outskirts of the towering black city-hive.

Traceries of laser and plasma fire divided the sky in a thousand places, making it look for all the world like some insanely complex set of blueprints. Some struck landing ships which flared, fluttered and died. Flak shells sent loud black flowers up into the air. Marauder air support shrieked in at intervals, moving in close, low formations like meteorites hunting as a pack, strafing the ground with stitching firestorms. Above it all, the purple sky boiled and thrashed and spat electric ribbons.

At ground level, Colonel Colm Corbec of the Tanith First and Only led his squad down the ramp of the troop ship and into the firezone. To either side, he could see lines of ships disgorging their troops into the field, a tide of men ten thousand strong. They reached the first line of cover, a punctured length of pipeline running along rusted pylons, and dropped down.

Corbec took a look each way and keyed in his micro-bead comm link. ‘Corbec to squad. Sound off.’

Voices chatted back along the link, responding.

By Corbec’s side, Trooper Larkin was cradling his lasgun and looking up at the sky with trembling fear. ‘Oh, this is bad...’ he murmured. ‘Psyker voodoo, very bad. We may think we had it hard at Voltis or Blackshard, but they’ll seem like a stroll round the garden next to this...’

‘Larks!’ Corbec hissed. ‘For Feth’s sake, shut up! Haven’t you never heard of morale?’

Larkin turned his bony, weasel face to his senior officer and old friend in genuine surprise. ‘It’s okay, Colonel!’ he insisted. ‘I didn’t have me comm link turned on! Nobody heard!’

Corbec grimaced. ‘I heard, and you’re scaring the crap out of me.’

They ducked down as a swathe of cannon fire chewed across the lines. Someone a few hundred yards away started screaming. They could hear the piercing shrieks over the roar of the storm and the landing troopships and the bombardment. Just.

‘Where’s the Commissar?’ Corbec growled. ‘He was going to lead us in.’

‘If he ain’t landed, he ain’t coming,’ said Larkin, looking up at the sky. ‘We were the last few to make it through before that happened.’

Next to Larkin, Trooper Raglon, the squad’s communications officer, looked up

from the powerful voxcaster set. 'No contact from the Commissar's dropship, sir. I've been scanning the orbital traffic and the Navy band, Colonel. This filthy Psyker storm took out a whole heap of troop ships. They're still counting the crash fires. We was lucky we got down before it really started.'

Corbec shivered. He didn't feel lucky.

Raglon went on. 'Our psykers upstairs are trying to break the storm, but...'

'But what?'

'It looks pretty certain the Commissar's troop ship was one of those vaporised in the storm.'

Corbec growled something indistinct. He felt cold, and could see the look on the faces of his men as the word spread down the line.

Corbec lifted his lasgun and keyed up his micro-bead. He had to rally them fast, get them moving. 'What are you waiting for?' he bawled. 'Diamond formation fireteam spread! Double time! Fire at will! Advance! For the memory of Tanith! Advance!'



IMPACT SITE, LOCATION UNKNOWN

BRIN MILO woke up. He was upside down, blind, suspended painfully from his restraint rig, his ribs bruised blue and a taste of blood in his mouth. But, unless someone was about to play a *really* nasty trick on him, he was alive.

He could hear... very little. The trickle and patter of falling water. A creaking. Someone moaning softly.

There was a loud bang and light flared into his dark-accustomed eyes. He smelled thermite and realised someone had just ejected the emergency hull-plates using the explosive bolts.

Daylight... thin, green, wet daylight... streamed in. Bragg's huge face swam up in front of Milo's, upside down.

'Hang on, Brinny-boy,' said Bragg softly. 'Soon have you down.' He started rattling the restraints and slamming the lock handle back and forth.

The restraints abruptly stopped restraining and Milo uttered a little yelp as he dropped six feet onto the sloping roof of the troop ship.

'Sorry,' Bragg said, helping him up. 'You hurt, lad?'

Milo shook his head. 'Where are we?'

Bragg paused as if he was thinking about this carefully. Then, with deliberation, he said, 'We're ear-lobe deep in doo-doo.'

THE TROOP SHIP, now just a crumpled sleeve of metal, had impacted at a steep angle on its roof. Milo climbed down and gazed back up at the mangled wreck. What amazed him only slightly less than the fact he was still alive, was that they had come down in what appeared to be a jungle. Enormous pinkish trees that looked like swollen, magnified root vegetables, formed a dense forest of flaccid trunks around them. The huge growths were strung with thick ropey vines, creepers and flowering tendrils, and thorny fern and horsetail covered the moist, steaming ground.

Everything was green, as all light, save for a clear shaft that slanted down through the trees where the troop ship had burst through, was filtered by the dense canopy of foliage above their heads. It was humid and sticky, and sappy water dripped from the trees. There was a sweet stink of fungoid flowers.

Bragg clambered down from the wreck to join the boy. A dozen other Ghosts had clambered out and were sat down or leaning against trees, waiting for spinning heads and ringing ears to clear. All had minor cuts and scrapes, except Trooper Obel who lay on a makeshift stretcher, his chest bloody and torn. Corporal Meryn had taken charge. He and Caffran were trying to open other emergency hatches to look for other survivors.

Milo saw Rawne had survived. The Major stood to one side with a tall, pale Ghost called Feygor, who served as his aide.

'I didn't know there were any jungles on this world,' Milo said.

'Me neither,' Bragg said. He was catching and piling equipment packs that Meryn was tossing down from the side of the wreck. 'Actually, I didn't even know what this world was called.'

Milo found Rawne by his side. 'We're in a forest hollow,' he said. 'The surface of Caligula is barren pumice, but it's punctured in many places by deep basins, many of them old craters or volcanic sinks. The cities are built down into the largest of them, but others sustain micro-climates wet enough for these forests. I think some of them were actually farmed... before the Enemy came in.'

'So where are we?' Feygor asked.

Rawne rubbed his throat, thoughtful. 'We've come down a good way off-target. I think there were some forest calderas north of Nero. On the wrong side of the lines.'

Feygor swore.

'I think the Major is correct,' said a voice.

Gaunt appeared, sliding down from a side vent in the punctured hull. He was tattered and bruised, with blood soaking the shoulder and side of his tunic under his coat. Meryn hurried over to help him.

'Not me,' said Gaunt, waving him off. 'The co-pilot's alive and he needs to be cut free.'

'It's a miracle anyone got out of that front end,' Meryn said with a whistle.

Gaunt crossed to Milo, Rawne and the others.

'Report, Major,' he said.

'Unless we find anyone else alive in there, we've got twelve able-bodied men, plus yourself, the boy Milo and the co-pilot. Minor injuries all round, though Trooper Grogan has a broken arm. But he can walk. Obel has chest injuries, pretty bad. Brennan is inside; he's a real mess and pinned, but he's alive. The rest are pulp.'

Rawne looked up at the wreck.

'Lucky shot got us, I guess. Missile...'

'Psykers,' growled Gaunt. 'They threw some freakshow storm up. Smashed us out of the sky.'

He crossed to the pile of equipment packs Bragg and Caffran were unloading and opened a compact carry-box. Out of this he slid a topolabe from its cushioned slot and held it up by the nurlled handgrip. The small brass machine whirred and the concentric dials span and clicked as the gravimetric gyros turned in the glass bubble of inert gas. After a moment, the machine chimed and flashed a reading on a dully back-lit blue display.

'We're in a forest caldera called K7-75, about thirty miles north-north-east of the Nero city perimeter. Your assessment was good, Major. We're on the wrong side of the lines and in pretty damn inhospitable country. There's dense forest for at least five miles in any direction, and this sinkhole's about half a mile deep. We'd better get ready to move.'

'Move?' Feygor asked. 'Commissar... the crash beacon is in working order. I can have it fixed up in a few moments.'

'And then, Feygor?' Gaunt shook his head sadly. 'About thirty-five miles south of us, the Imperial Guard is engaged in a massive

assault. Thousands are dying. Every ship, and craft and man is committed to the attack. There will be *nothing* to spare to come looking – across enemy lines, mark you – for a few lost souls like us. They'll have already written us off. Besides, there's a Psyker-bred storm raging up there, remember? No one could get to us even if they *wanted* to.'

Rawne spat and cursed. 'So what do we do?'

Gaunt grinned, but without humour. 'See how far we can get. Better that than just wait here to die.'

IN FIFTEEN MINUTES, the survivors were assembled and their injuries tended. Salvageable equipment and weapons were divided up. Both Milo and the dazed co-pilot were given a bolt pistol and belt of shells. Obel and the now-freed Brennan lay unconscious on stretcher palates.

Rawne looked grimly at Gaunt. He nodded his head at the two injured men. 'We should... be merciful.'

Gaunt frowned. 'We're taking them with us.'

Rawne shook his head. 'With respect, they'll probably both be dead in an hour. Taking them will tie up four able-bodied soldiers as stretcher bearers.'

'We're taking them,' Gaunt repeated. The set of his jaw said that he would not be contradicted.

'If you lashed 'em both to a frame,' Bragg said thoughtfully, 'I could drag 'em along. Better me than four other boys.'

Meryn and Feygor raised the two stretcher cases onto an A-frame of wood and Bragg took the weight of the point on his shoulder. Caffran has used his silver Tanith knife to cut lengths of waxy creeper and bound them on for a grip.

'I won't be fast, mind,' Bragg noted. But with the party clearing the way, he could pull them along on the papoose efficiently enough.

The Commissar checked the topolabe again, scanning for closer detail.

'Interesting,' he murmured. 'About two miles east of here there's some kind of structure. Maybe an old farming complex or something. Might provide us with some shelter. Let's see.'

Gaunt had armed himself with a lasgun from one of the dead. He handed his chainsword to Rawne.

'Take point please, Major,' he said.

Rawne moved to the head of the column and started to slice his way through the dense, wet forest.



NERO HIVE

THE TANITH Ghosts advanced through the outer complexes of the Hive, surging down an embankment and across the blasted concrete of a six-lane arterial highway. Broken vehicles littered the lanes and great pools of kerosene blazed in curtains of fire. Corbec urged them forward, under traffic control boards that still flashed and winked speed limits and direction pointers. Guns blazing, they began to assault a vast block of worker residences on the far side.

As the battle group swept into the shattered hallways of the old worker residences, fighting became a close-quarter business with the enemy forces, now seen face to face for the first time. Humans, corrupted by Chaos, cult worshippers whose physical forms had become twisted and warped. Most wore the black, vulcanised work suits of the Hive workforce, daubed now with Chaos patterns, their heads protected with tight grey hoods and industrial glare visors. They were well-armed too.

Bodies littered the concourses and galleries of the residences, shattered glass and twisted plastic covered the ground. Intense fires blazed through some areas, and the air was full of drifting cinders, like incandescent snow. And flies: dark, fat-bodied flies.

Blasting as he advanced, Corbec fired to left and right, through doorways and thin plasticboard walls, cutting down or exploding the foe all around. Flanked in a fireteam, Larkin, Suth, Varl, Mallor, Durcan and Billad worked in immediate support. Larkin snatched off the occasional shot, his aim as fine as usual, though Corbec knew that, thanks to the storm, he was closer to snapping than ever. Suth had the squad's melta, and seared them a path.

Bolt fire and las-shot cut their way. Billad jerked as he was hit repeatedly, sprawling back against a wall and sliding down. Corbec sent a steady stream of shot into the smoke haze. The flies buzzed.

The radio chatter was almost as deafening as the firefight. Guard forces had begun to

pincer the city. A combined force of Royal Volpone 50th and Raymian 13th and 16th had driven a steel fist into the ore-smelter heartland of the Hive, meeting the enemy's main motorised units in an armoured battle in the vast, echoing barns of the spaceship yards and dry-docks. Rumours were that a battalion of Lakkarii Gundogs and some Raven Guard Space Marines had punched through into the upper levels, into the Administratum Tower itself. But an overall victory seemed far away, especially given the psychic storm, which effectively shut off any further reinforcements – or anything else.

'Any joy with the air cover?' Corbec asked over the crackle of laser fire.

Trooper Raglon answered on the bead-link. 'Marauder flights are all out of action, sir. Fleet Command recalled them because of the storm. The, erm, effects are screwing their telemetry.'

Corbec glanced up at the corrosive purple turbulence that passed for sky. Forget the aircraft, that nightmare was screwing with *his* telemetry. This close to a manifestation of Chaos, his kinaesthetic senses were whirling. His balance was shot and he felt nauseous, with a throbbing pain in his temple. He knew most of his men were the same. There had been a dozen spontaneous nosebleeds already.

Yet they were making headway, clawing through the grim habitat towers and the workforce residence blocks where things came down to knife and pistol, room to room, in the old, dirty tenements where the lowest level of worker had dwelt.

The Commissar would have been proud... Corbec thought. *The Ghosts had done the job.* He spat out a fly and listened carefully to the flow of radio traffic again for a moment. The Fleet Command channel repeated its overriding directive: unless the enemy psykers could be neutralised, the Fleet couldn't land any more reinforcements, any more of the five million Imperial Guard troops still waiting in troop ships in orbit. Or deploy air cover. The fate of the entire battle teetered in the balance.

Corbec brushed off another fly. The air was thick with them now, thick with flies and cinders and ash. The smell was unbearable. Colm Corbec sighed. He knew the signs: they were close to something, something bad. Something of Chaos.

'Watch yourselves!' he warned his group over the link. 'We're getting into a real nest of hell here!'

Through the swarming clouds of buzzing flies, the fire team edged along a corridor littered with clear plastic shards and torn paper. Out in the concourse below, a fierce hand-to-hand battle was ending in screams and sporadic pistol fire. Something blew up a mile away, shaking the ground.

Corbec reached the turn in the hall and waved his men back.

Just in time, his fireteam sheltered in doorways as heavy stub gun fire raked up and down the old back stairway, disintegrating the steps and tearing down the stained wall tiles.

Corbec looked round at Larkin, who was murmuring some Imperial Prayer under his breath, waving off the flies. It was probably the oath of allegiance to the Emperor they had all been taught at school back home on Tanith. *Home...*

This had once been someone's home, Corbec thought, snapping back to reality. A dingy old hallway in a dingy old high rise, where humble, hardworking people came back from the shiftwork at the fabrication plants in the Hive and cooked meagre meals for their tired children.

'Larks!' He gestured up the stairwell. 'A little Mad Magic on that stubber!'

Larkin wiped his mouth and shook out his neck like a pianist about to play. He took out his nightscope, a small heat-sensitive spotter he'd used back home poaching *larisel* out in the woods at night. He trained it up the hall, found a hub of heat emanating from the wall.

Most would have aimed for that, thinking it the body heat of the gunner. Larkin knew better. The source was the muzzle heat of the big cannon. That put the gunner about two feet behind it, to the left.

'A bottle of sacra says it's a headshot,' Corbec whispered as he saw Larkin snuggle down and aim his lasgun.

'Done,' Varl said.

Larkin punched a single shot up the stairwell and through the wall.

They moved forward, cautious at first, but there was no further firing.

Covering each other, they moved up the smashed staircase, past the landing where the cult soldier lay dead across his stub gun, head shattered. Corbec smiled and Varl sighed.

They entered a further landing and fanned out. There was a smell of burning flesh, and the flies were thicker than ever. Larkin

edged along one wall, looking at the trash and broken possessions that had been dropped in the rubble. Along the wall, under a series of twisted runes sprayed in paint, some one had nailed up a series of dolls and other children's toys. Something in Larkin's heart broke as he gazed on the crucified dolls, remembering a world of family and friends and children forever lost to him. Then he realised that not all of the dolls were dolls...

On the far side of the gallery, Corbec, Durcan and Suth burst into a long concrete chamber that had once been a central meeting hall for the tenement block. It was dark inside. Several thousand eyes blinked in their direction. They all belonged to the same... *thing*.

Something immeasurably vast began to coil up out of the darkness, extending the flaccid, blue-white mass of its bloated body, toxic spittle drooling from its befanged mouths. Jellied things quivered in the dark spaces of its translucent skin and flies billowed around it like a cloak.

Corbec's nose spurted blood and soaked his beard as he backed away, his mind seized in horror. Suth dropped the melta with a clatter and started to retch, sliding down the wall, unable to stand. Durcan seemed unable to move. He began to cry, wailing as he fumbled to raise his lasgun. Limpid, greasy coils lashed out of the dark chamber and encircled him, embraced him, then crushed him so hard and so suddenly he burst like a tomato.

Mallor and Varl turned and saw the horror slithering up from the chamber, saw Suth helpless and Corbec frozen, saw the pulpy red slick that had been Durcan.

'Daemon! Daemon!' Varl screamed down the comm link. '*DAEMON!*'



CALDERA K7-75, NORTH OF NERO HIVE

GAUNT HELD UP a hand and announced a ten minute rest. The group eased back and took the weight of their feet, leaning on tree trunks, hunkering down.

Meryn took the med-pack back to Bragg and helped him lower the papoose.

'Oh, gods!' Milo heard him say. The young piper crossed over as Gaunt himself approached.

Meryn looked up, treating the ugly wounds of the two unconscious men. 'It's

this place,' he explained. 'Hot, wet, spores in the air, insects. Their wounds get reinfected as fast as I clean them. Obel's fading fast. Some kind of fungus narcotising the raw flesh. Maggots too.' He shook his head and continued with his work.

Milo moved away. The smell rising from the wounded men was not pleasant.

Nearby stood the co-pilot. He'd pulled his flight helmet off, and was staring nervously into the green darkness around them, clutching his bolt pistol. Milo thought he looked young, no older than him. The flesh around his cranial implants looked raw and fresh. *He probably feels just like me,* thought Milo. *In over his depth.*

He had just considered approaching the navy cadet and speaking to him when the low whine of bolter fire sang through the trees. Everyone ducked for cover, and there was a staccato series of safety locks disengaging and powercells humming to life.

Near to Milo, Gaunt crawled forward, tapping his micro-bead.

'Rawne? Answer!' he hissed. The Major, with Feygor, Caffran and a trooper called Kalen, had scouted ahead towards the mysterious structure.

'Firefight!' came Rawne's response. 'We're pinned! Daagh! Emperor's throne! There's—'
The link went dead.

'Damn!' hissed Gaunt. He clambered to his feet. 'Meryn! Bragg! Guard the wounded! You – Navy boy! Stay with them! The rest with me, fire team spread!'

The Ghosts moved forward and Milo moved with them, checking his bolt pistol was cleared to fire. Despite the fear, he felt pride. The Commissar had needed all the men he could muster. He hadn't thought twice about including Milo.



NERO HIVE

CORBEC WAS sure his life was over when Larkin started shooting. Driven over the edge by what he had seen nailed along the wall, Larkin went crazy, mindless, oblivious to the otherwise transfixing image of Chaos in that old tenement. Larkin opened fire and kept firing.

'Larkin! Larkin!' Corbec hissed.

The little man's howl was drying away into a hoarse whisper. A repetitive clicking came from the lasgun in his hands, the power cell

exhausted. The lashing tentacles of the vast thing in the hallway had been driven back the hammerblow of relentless laser fire. They had a moment of grace, time to retreat.

Corbec lead his scrambling fireteam back down the tenement hall, half-carrying Larkin.

'Contact Fleet Command!' he yelled to Raglon over his bead. 'Tell them what we've found!'



CALDERA K7-75

IN THE COVER of a slumped tree-stump, Trooper Caffran sighted his lasgun to his shoulder and loosed a burst of laser fire that sliced explosively through the foliage ahead. Bolter fire returned, smacking into the wood around him, blasting sprays of splinters and gouts of sap.

'Major Rawne?' Caffran yelled. 'Comm link's dead!'

'I know!' Rawne spat, dropped down against a tree nearby as metal shot exploded the bark behind him. He threw down Gaunt's chainsword and swung his own lasgun up to fire.

Feygor took up a prone position, blasting with his own weapon, Kalen to his side. The four Ghost lasguns blasted an arc of fire into the dense trees, the dim grove flickering with the muzzle flashes.

Rawne span, his gun lowered, but dropped his aim with a curse as he saw Gaunt moving in behind them, the men in fireteam line.

'Report!' hissed Gaunt.

'Just walked into heavy bolter fire. Enemy positions ahead, unseen. Feels like an ambush, but who knew we were coming?'

'Comm link?'

'Dead... jammed.'

'It'd help if we could see what we were shooting at,' Gaunt remarked. He waved a 'come here' to Trooper Brostin, who doubled-timed over, cradling the single flamer they'd pulled intact from the troopship.

'Positions!' Gaunt yelled, and fanned his men out so that all could take a clear shot once the target was revealed. 'Brostin?'

The Trooper triggered the flame cannon and a volcanic spear of liquid fire spat into the dense undergrowth. Maintaining the spray, like a horizontal fountain of fire, Brostin swept it left and right.

The trees, horsetails and giant ferns ahead flared and blazed, some of them igniting as if their sap was petrol, some wilting and withering like dust. In twenty seconds, a wall of jungle had been scorched aside and they had a clear view sixty paces into an artificially cleared area.

Silence. Not even the bolter fire that had got them ducking.

'Scope!' called Gaunt, and took the instrument as Milo offered it up.

'Looks like we have...' Gaunt paused as the focusing dials on his scope whirred and spun. 'It's an Imperial installation. Three armoured, modular cabins, two larger hardened shelters... they've all had the insignia painted out for some reason. Communicator-array and up-link mast for a voxcaster, that's probably what's jamming us... perimeter defence net... slaved servitors mounted into autoloader bolt cannon. You must have tripped a sensor as you came in, Major. Triggered them off. I think we've fried a couple of them.'

'What is this place?' murmured Caffran.

'A way out... a chance we never thought we had. If we can get in there alive, that is.' Gaunt fell silent.

'But what's it doing out here in the middle of this jungle?' Milo found himself asking.

Gaunt looked round at him. 'Good question.'



THE WORD wasn't good. All ground forces were stretched to breaking point maintaining the gains they had made. There was no one to move in to support the Ghosts.

'How can we fight that kind of stuff?' stammered Suth.

Corbec shook his head. He'd pulled the entire battle group back to the embankment overlooking the highway and the tenements beyond. Tenements that held the most abominable thing he'd ever seen.

'But it has to die!' Larkin whispered. 'Don't you see? It's causing the storm. Unless it dies, we're all stuck here!'

'You can't know that, Larks!' Varl sneered.

Corbec wasn't so sure. Larkin had always had sixth sense for strange things. 'Emperor save us all!' Corbec said, exasperated. He thought hard. There had to be something, something. What would Gaunt have done?

Something *arrogant*, no doubt. Pulled rank, broken the rules, thrown the strategy books out of the window – and used the resources he knew he could count on...

'Hey, Raglon! Over here, lad!' he yelled to his comm-officer. 'Patch me a link to the *Navarre*!'

EXECUTIVE OFFICER Kreff cleared his throat, took a deep breath and stepped into the strategium, the Captain's armoured inner sanctum at the centre of the *Navarre*'s bridge. Captain Wysmark sat in dark, contemplative silence on a reclined throne, quietly assessing the flickering overlays of runic and schematic data that flowed across the smoothly curved walls and roof of the room.

He turned in his chair slightly. 'Kreff?'

'I have, um, this is unorthodox, sir, but—'

'Out with it, man.'

'I've just spoken with Colonel Corbec, the acting commander of the Tanith First. His battlegroup is assaulting the western edge of the Nero Hive. He requests we... activate the main batteries and present on a target he has acquired.'

Wysmark snorted, the glow of the readouts flickering across his face in the gloom.

'Doesn't this idiot know anything about Naval tactics?' he chuckled. 'Fleet weapons will only engage a surface target from orbit *before* troop deployment. Once the ground forces are in, air-strikes are the responsibility of the attack squadrons.'

Kreff nodded. 'Which are grounded due to the psychic storm, sir. The Colonel is aware it is counter to usual tactics, as orbital bombardment is not known for its... um... finesse. However, he claims this is a critical situation... and he can supply us with pin-point co-ordinates.'

Wysmark frowned, thoughtful. 'Your assessment, Kreff? You've spend more time with these footsloggers since they've been aboard than anyone. Is this man mad, or should I grant his request?'

Kreff dared a little smile. 'Yes... and yes, sir.'

Wysmark's mouth curved ever so slightly towards a smile. He rotated his chair to face Kreff. 'Let's see those co-ordinates.'

Kreff jumped forward and handed him the dataslate.

Wysmark keyed his micro-bead intercom. 'Communications. Patch me to Fleet

Command. I wish to advise them of our next action. Fire control... energise the main batteries... I have a firing solution here. All stations, this is the Captain... rig for main weapon firing.'

All so very neat and civil, Kreff smiled. This really *was* the only way to fight a war.

THERE WAS A blink of light, an astonishing shockwave that knocked them all down, then a deafening roar that hammered across them.

Corbec rose, coughing dust and picked Raglon up. 'Right on the button,' he said jovially to his astonished men.

They scrambled up to the top of the slope and looked over the balustrade. Below them, the ruinous expanse of a ten-lane highway stretched into the dark industrial high rises of the hive. Across the highway, a vast blazing crater stood where the tenements had been.

'Holy Throne of Earth!' Varl stammered.

'Friends in high places,' Corbec said. He glanced down the slope at the hundreds of waiting troops below, troops who could already sense the change in the air. There was smoke, and fumes and cordite... but the stink of Chaos was retreating. The storm was blowing itself out.

'Let's go!' he yelled into his beak.

THE COMMS officer saluted Kreff as he crossed the polished deck of the serene bridge.

'Signal from the surface, sir.'

Kreff nodded.

'Standard Guard voxcaster encryption, data and time as now, orbit lag adjusted... message reads: *Ghostly gratitude to the Navarre. Kreff, you bastard, we knew you had it in you.* Message ends. Sorry about the vulgarity, sir...'

The comm officer looked up from his slate.

'I'll take that,' Kreff said, trying to hide his grin as he sauntered away.



IMPERIAL OUTPOST, CALDERA K7-75

GAUNT MOVED in close to the cabins, bolt pistol in hand. Behind him came Feygor and Caffran, edging slowly.

There was a low whirr and one of the servitors nearby detected the movement and

swung around, bringing its automated weapon to bear.

Gaunt blasted it apart with three quick shots. Diving forward, he slammed in through the doorway, rolling up in the blue, cold, artificial light of the interior, hunting for a target.

There was a dark shape, apparently armed. Gaunt got off a shot, missed, and evaded again. 'I am Imperial Commissar Gaunt! By the authority of the Emperor, identify yourself!'

'Gaunt?' a voice said, softly, in surprise, from the dark.

'Who—'

'Ibram Gaunt?'

Gaunt raised himself up slowly, gazing blindly into the dark. 'I know that voice. Rael? Rael, is that you?'

A spotlight came on, illuminating a lean, wiry man in black, form-fitting impact-armour. He was clean shaven, green-eyed, with a greying crew-cut.

'Rael Tagore...' Gaunt murmured, amazed.

Tagore lowered his laspistol. 'What the hell are you doing here?' he asked.

Gaunt was about to reply when Feygor and Caffran burst in.

He threw himself at them, grabbing their gun barrels and slamming them backwards.

'We're okay!' he yelled at them. 'He's a friend!'

NAME'S TAGORE,' Feygor told Major Rawne. 'Claims to be a pencil pusher from Adeptus Administratum, but he's no Fething bureaucrat. Custom body armour, a set-up like this... you know what I'm thinking...'

Rawne nodded. 'Intelligence. Covert operations...'

'Milo?' Corporal Meryn called. He had been monitoring the traffic on the voxcaster. Milo crossed the clearing outside the outpost where all the Ghosts now were assembled, resting.

'Take this to Gaunt,' Meryn said, handing Milo a transcript print-out.

Milo got to his feet and entered the main cabin, to find Commissar Gaunt and his 'old friend' sat at a table. Milo was fascinated by the grey-haired man. He hung back in the shadows of the doorway. Gaunt and Tagore continued talking as if he wasn't there.

'Macaroth has a spy network of extraordinary reach,' Tagore was saying in

soft, careful tones. 'Oh, you'd expect as much from any Warmaster or Crusade Lord. Old Slaydo had an extensive intelligence grapevine throughout the fleet. But Macaroth's is defensive. The levels of internal security are elaborate. The infrastructure of his personal retinue, his 'war court', is enclosed, independent of the Administratum. It may just be that he's scrupulous about his security, but it's beginning to cause unease.'

'What sort of unease?' Gaunt asked.

'Heavy duty unease, particularly when you consider the vast powerbase Macaroth has at his disposal. Also, consider his track record. Since he took over as High Commander of the Crusade, there have been a lot of big, showy offensives. But there have also been a lot of slip ups. What seem to be tactical errors of judgement. Hell, you saw one, Tanith. No way that place should have been hung out to dry. So the question is... is Macaroth really that inept?'

'I've never liked the man, but, no.' Gaunt paused. 'Three successful campaigns on the Eastern Fringe, Warmaster on a noted Ultima Crusade. You have to be more than lucky to chalk up those kind of credits.'

Tagore nodded. 'So, if they weren't mistakes, what were they? Unavoidable losses? Sacrifices that had to be made in order to achieve certain other goals?'

'Do you have answers?'

'Nowhere near. I'd been here on Caligula for ten months trying to connect with a particularly strong line of his spy network. There was something here, something valuable, something his people were after. Then... boom! Chaos sweeps in! I fled the Hive and ran to ground in this shelter I'd prepared. I had a feeling help would be on the way.' Tagore frowned. 'Macaroth would send the Crusade in quick smart to retake Caligula, but not because of the strategic value.'

'Come on... all the mills and plants and factories?'

'How may will be standing when this assault is over?' Tagore smiled. 'It will take years to restore Caligula to the position of being a vital fabrication world. Macaroth wanted this place for some other reason... one that is costing thousands of lives.' He fell silent, as if suddenly aware of the boy.

'This has come through, sir,' Milo said, holding out the print-out. Gaunt took it with a nod. 'Can I ask-' Milo began to add.

'No, you can't,' Gaunt said. 'So,' he added, turning to Tagore, 'you've got a ship here, right?'

'Ready and waiting. A small orbital cutter. I was going to lie low and signal the Fleet once the fighting was over. But there's a major psychic storm upstairs. It's going to be a while before anyone goes anywhere.'

Gaunt held up the report. 'Not anymore there isn't.'



DAY TWO EIGHTY-NINE, TANTH REGIMENT TROOP TRANSIT, ABOVE CALIGULA

'SO HE DIDN'T DIE?' Corbec mused, sat on his bunk in the troop bay.

Bragg shook his head and swigged from the bottle of sacra. 'Don't think nothing's gonna kill old Gaunt. He said he was gonna get us all out, and he did. Even Obel and Brennan.'

Corbec looked thoughtful. 'Actually,' he said finally, 'I meant Rawne.'

They both looked across the quiet bay to where Rawne and Feygor sat in quiet conversation.

'Oh, him. No, worst luck.' Bragg passed the bottle back to Corbec. 'So, I hear you had some fun of your own?'

THE TERTIARY hanger deck was empty, a vast metal vault lit only by the amber mooring lights that flashed in series.

Gaunt walked with Tagore to the cutter craft sat on the central ramp.

'Pure chance we should meet again like that, after all these years. It seems a lifetime ago since Estragon Prime. You weren't a even a Commissar then.'

'And you weren't a spy,' Gaunt said wryly.

Tagore looked grim. 'Macaroth needs to be watched. Carefully, from all sides. You hear or see anything... you know how to contact me.'

'I hope everything you've told me is wrong,' Gaunt said.

'So do I,' Rael Tagore said, turning to go. 'I guess we're going to find out.' ●



PLANET OBZIDION IS WITHIN TWO HOURS OF DESTRUCTION, ITS PEOPLE TO BE OFFERED AS SACRIFICE TO THE CHAOS GODS. TWO BLOOD ANGELS BUY TIME FOR A CALLIDUS ASSASSIN TO WARN HIGH COMMAND.

DESTROY ALL THE HEADS! SEVER THE BODY FROM ITS BRAINS!

THE EVIL THAT BOILS WITHIN IS ENOUGH TO POWER ITS CARCASS!

NONETHELESS, ANTEOR, TAKE OFF ITS HEADS!

OBVIOUS TACTICS!

Episode Eight

SCRIPT AND ART DAVID PUGH

KACHOOOM!

KABLAN!

LIKE THE HYDRA, CHAOS REBIRTHS US!

TROILUS, FALL BACK!

STILL IT COMES!

GOOD! LET IT FOLLOW US...

KACHOOOM!
KABLAN!

UP THE MISSILE TOWER...

I SEE YOUR PLAN, BUT NOW I TRULY BELIEVE NOTHING CAN KILL THIS THING!

I HOPE THE ASSASSIN FARES BETTER.

KACHOOOM!



E. SEWHERE...

DOWN THIS ALLEY, A
COMMUNICATIONS
TOWER!



MUST KEEP
THEM BACK.
THEIR TOUCH
IS DEATH!



CURSES!
PLAGUE
DEMONS!



TRAPPED!



THUK!

KCHOW!

KCHOW!

RRIP!

UGH!...ACID!
...RECH!...
CHOKING ME!



KCHOOM!

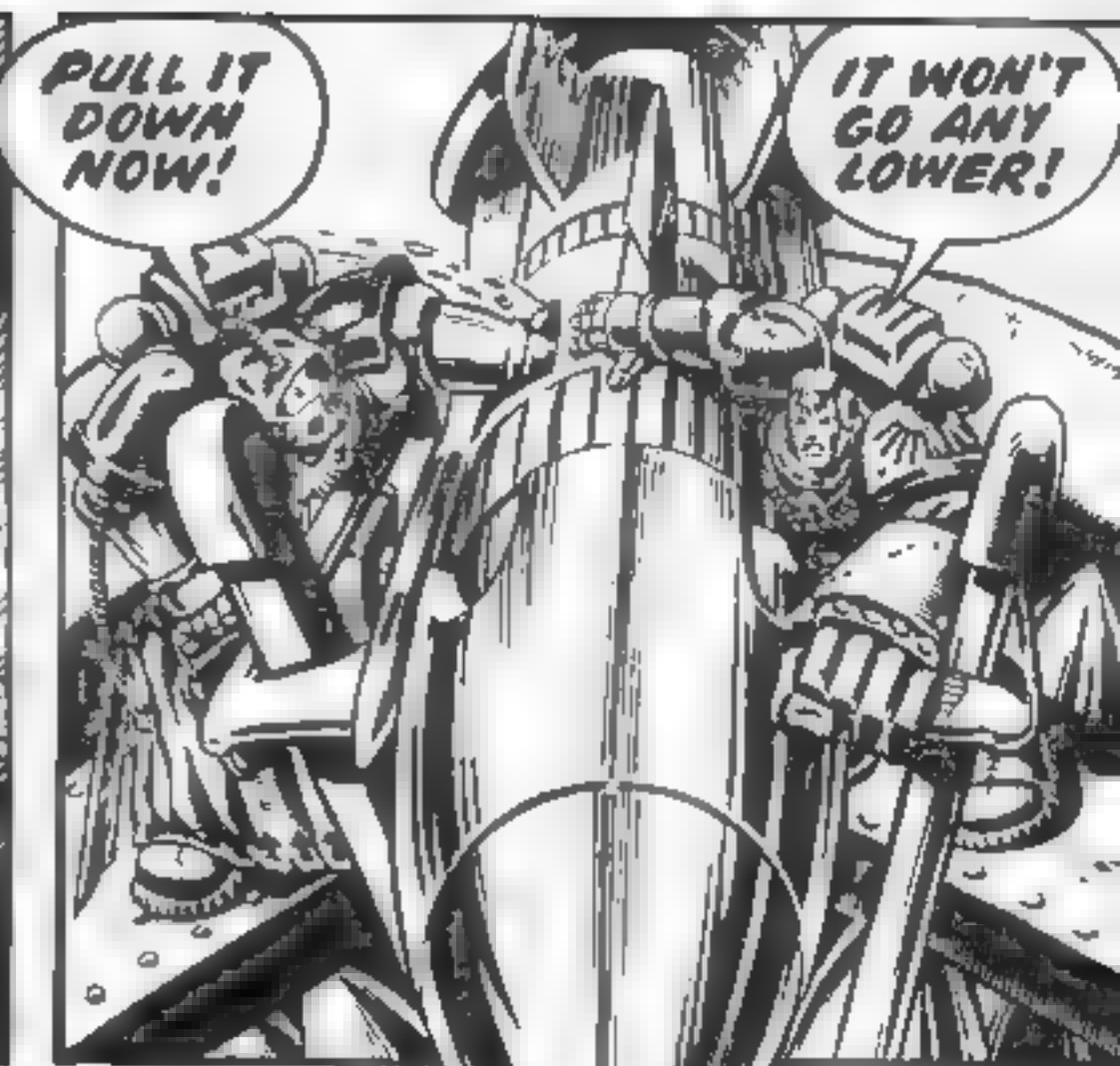
THIS...CALLS...
FOR SOME...
OBVIOUS
TACTICS...

THWIP!

...AND A LOT
OF LUCK...

RRIP!
RRIP!
RRIP!





TO BE CONTINUED



HELL IN A BOTTLE

By Simon Jowett

LET CHAOSSS REIGN!' Kargon's battle-cry carried over the sounds of carnage and burned itself into the minds of killers and victims alike. Continents away, Bloodletters paused to raise a shrill answering cry, before returning to their appointed task: the complete desecration of another Imperium homeworld. The towers of Ilium were falling.

Detonations filled the air as a squadron of Marauder ground attack craft punched through the pall of smoke that hung over the capital city. Chaoshammer air-to-ground missiles kicked free of their wing-mounted cradles and screamed earthwards. The jewel-like spires of the Administratum complex shattered and fell, dark plumes of debris blossoming miles into the air. The Imperial garrison's concern for civilian casualties had been abandoned. Only one strategy remained: destruction of the invaders, whatever the cost.

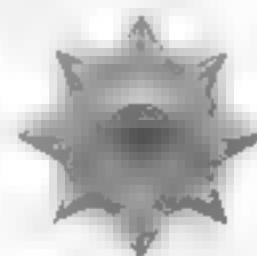
At an unspoken signal from Kargon, several of the nearest Bloodletters turned their attention to the attacking aircraft, each raising its weapon skyward. Sword, axe or spear, these weapons were primarily conduits for the unearthly power of Chaos which, focused by their wielders' rudimentary wills, leapt skywards, towards the attacking Imperial craft.

Organic matter first: the flesh of every human pilot slid, gathered itself, then reformed. Tumours burst on skin and writhed with void-born life. Every bone hummed with imminent destruction as Chaos invaded its blood-dark marrow. In seconds, every pilot's sling-seat was occupied by a grotesque malformation of cells vibrating to an ever-higher pitch.

As the dull reports of exploding flesh painted the cockpits red and black, the Marauders' power plants overloaded, the

smooth mathematics of their operation unbalanced by the Chaotic assault. The aircraft spun crazily out of control, some spiralling across the sky, others ploughing into the planetary crust, all finally engulfed in fireballs of pyrotechnic annihilation.

As the Bloodletters returned to the task of dismantling the capital city brick by brick, soul by soul, Kargon surveyed the madness and saw that it was good. Dubbed 'The Seed-Bearer' by those who sought to invoke his presence, Kargon had feasted on the entrails of a thousand worlds. Drawn to breaches in the membrane between warp space and the material universe like a shark to fresh blood, Kargon knew only one purpose: strike, violate, move on. Soon Ilium would lay behind him, forgotten, like so many worlds before.



ILIIUM ISS OURSSS?' The assembled horde – a hideous confederation of lesser Daemons, mutant spawn, Bloodletters, Chaos Warriors and hybrids of every life-form that had been infected by the contagion of Chaos – bowed their heads in affirmation. The question was unnecessary. The sounds of conflict had been replaced by an absolute silence that spoke of only one thing: victory. The tang of burning flesh hung heavily in the air, as it did over every city on Ilium. The pyre before which Kargon and his cadre stood reached as high as the tallest of the once-proud towers and painted the sky with its slick, black smoke. The pestilence of humanity had been wiped from the planet; Kargon and his followers had drunk deeply of their souls. There remained only one more act to perform: the Ritual of Seeding.

'Let it begin!' Kargon commanded. With a shuffling of feet and a creaking of armour, four mighty Chaos Daemons stepped forward from the assembly to stand in the clear space before Kargon and the pyre. Creatures of unstoppable violence, they stood, wings folded, their raging blood-lust quelled by the dark charisma of their leader. An awed hush descended over their fellows. There was no room in the semi-sentient minds of the Chaos-spawn for the subtleties of religious feeling, but they knew when they were in the presence of one of the High Mysteries of Chaos.

With a sibilant hiss and crack, the brazen breastplate of the first of the selected Daemons peeled back along hidden seams, exposing pallid, grey-white flesh. Thick, dark veins pulsed beneath its semi-translucent surface. The pulses grew quicker, stronger as the veins began to swell, pushing out against the restraining flesh. A low, bubbling moan issued from the creature's throat, accompanied by the sounds of three more breastplates opening.

A low animal murmur drifted through the watching crowd as all four sacrificial candidates began to tremble, their exposed flesh quaking and distending, caught in the grip of a dark, palsied ecstasy.

The chest of the first Daemon, now bulging far beyond the limits of its armour, split explosively, expelling the tightly-wound veins across yards of ground. The earth was soaked by purple-black ichor as the veins continued to pulse and flex of their own volition. With a sigh of almost post-coital satisfaction, the Daemon fell first to its knees, then face-forward into the dirt.

One by one the other three fell, all signs of life exhausted but for the mass of pulsating veins that continued to coil and uncoil on the ground before them, growing fatter with every pulse, rubbing slickly against each other as they approached their own apotheosis.

The veins, now as thick around as the barrel chests of the Daemons from which they sprang, burst in a cannonade of viscous fluid. The horde drew back, but Kargon stepped forward, his breastplate now open, revealing a wet maw, from which pale tentacles flashed to taste the raining droplets.

From the depths of Kargon's chest uncoiled a single, thicker tentacle. Ignoring the dark rain that spattered his ornate armour, it drove itself into the pool of ichor

at his feet, into the ground beneath as if searching for the core of the planet itself. Kargon stood rigidly as the tentacle pulsed once, twice, then withdrew, coiling back on itself, settling once again deep within the Seed-Bearer's chest. The smaller tentacles that ringed Kargon's maw licked hungrily along its length, cleaning away all traces of the ichor.

'The ceremony iss complete. The sseed of Chaoss growsss here!' Kargon announced, his armour sealed, his voice soft with satisfaction. Scoured clean of human life, Ilium was now the cradle for Chaos' seed. In time, new life would grow: twisted, hideous, pliant to the will of Kargon's masters – an infection waiting to spread.



'OUR TASSSK HERE isss done!' Kargon's words rang out across the glassy plain on which his entire force stood. They had travelled from every continent, every shattered city, every ruined sector of Ilium to gather on this patch of desert that had once been the control centre of the Imperial garrison. The sand beneath their feet had been scorched, melted and fused by a final, futile act of suicidal defiance: the detonation of the garrison's remaining nuclear stockpile. Here and there, fragments of the garrison buildings protruded from the cracked surface like ancient standing stones, their original purpose erased by the blight of Chaos and already forgotten by the victorious invaders.

'But there are other worldsss that long to bear the harshhh fruit of Chaoss! We shall journey to thessse worldsss, harrow their souls and make them fit to receive the sssseed of Chaos!'

Kargon gestured towards the Chaos Gate that had been erected on the plain. Though quiescent, its design would dizzy any human onlooker. The sigils etched on its surface glowed with a menacing, lambent radiance, awaiting Kargon's command.

'The command isss given!' As he spoke, Kargon noticed the unusually restive atmosphere that permeated his troops. After such a complete victory, they would normally exhibit a stolid complacency. Having fed on a planet's worth of souls, they would be satisfied, ready to move on. Instead Kargon sensed something that

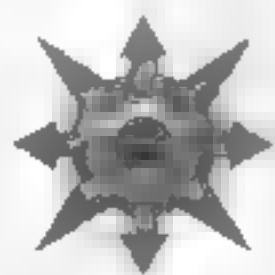
would normally accompany their arrival on a new world, one that promised a rich harvest of pain: hunger.

'The command isss *given!*' Kargon repeated. The gate should have already spun into life, the component parts of its multiple lattice structure turning in ways that violated every law of motion as it tore a new hole in material space. But the lattice remained stubbornly immobile, the tides of warp space beyond Kargon's reach.

A puzzled shuffling rippled through the ranks of Daemons. They, too, sensed that something was not as it should be. Kargon ignored them. Within his ancient helmet, supra-dimensional lenses realigned themselves over his multi-faceted eyes, focusing both inward, to the fluid shard of Chaos that burned at his heart, and out, beyond Ilium, where he found...

Nothing. A barrier beyond which he could not reach, beyond which there appeared to be nothing for his inhuman senses to grasp, no clue to the reason for this confounding turn of events.

'There must be a reassson!' Kargon muttered, while an unaccustomed sensation gnawed at the edges of his awareness. *Hunger!*



THE REASON SAT, blinking sweat from eyes that felt as if they had been seared by gazing into the very fires of Hell. Before him a periscopic sight hung from an articulated cradle. Each twist of its operating handles provided a new angle on Kargon and his troops or offered mind-numbing views of the planet-wide devastation. Along one wall of the small annex in which he sat, a bank of printers chattered out statistical assessments of the speed and efficiency of Kargon's victory. His name was Tydaeus, Instructor Sergeant of the Iron Hearts Space Marine Chapter, supervisor of the Mimesis Engine and, for the last hour, he had struggled to comprehend what he had seen.

Wrenching his gaze from the viewfinder's binocular eyepieces, Tydaeus tore a strip of parchment from the nearest spool. The arcane sigils of the Adeptus Mechanicus gave the same answer to the question he had asked seven times in as many minutes: Ilium was secure, isolated from every other system in the outpost. The only way to make

it more so would be to begin stripping gears and rods from the very guts of the Engine itself. However, Tydaeus was a supervisor, not a Tech-Priest; this would have to do.

Tydaeus sat back in his chair, closed his eyes and tried to calm the hurricane of images that roared within the confines of his skull. Images of invasion, of merciless assault, death and desecration, of a vile act of planetary humiliation that no human had ever seen before and lived to report. None of which could be said to have truly happened at all.

Ilium was a fiction, one training ground of many that could be generated by a bizarre machine set deep in the bowels of a training outpost that was all but ignored, even by the Chapter to which it belonged. Ancient technology, old before the Emperor first ascended the throne, had been unearthed and used to create an addition to the training of Space Marine Initiates: worlds on which Initiates could fight, die and fight again, learning from their mistakes without paying the usual price for a failed strategy – their own death and the deaths of their fellow Marines.

Lexmechanics, Artisans and Logises had spent decades constructing the Mimesis Engine. Not only Ilium, but simulations of a thousand unreal worlds were created, amalgams of every planet on which Space Marines had fought and died. Doubts were raised about the sanctity of such an enterprise, the purity of any technology that set out to re-make the universe. Many were reminded of the foul desire of Chaos-cultists and the dark gods they worshipped to do exactly the same thing.

In the end, ecumenical concerns had little to do with the side-lining of the Mimesis Engine. No Space Marine worth his salt would waste more than a sneer on it. 'A Space Marine prays for only one chance – the chance to die serving the Emperor!' opined Lord Commander Rubinek, on hearing of the project's completion. In the face of this opposition, the project's supporters proposed that the Mimesis Engine be assigned to the Iron Hearts, to be used in the earliest stages of their Initiates' training. Lexmechanics would monitor the combat performance of these Initiates and thus evaluate the Engine's usefulness.

During the decades that followed, Initiates had come and gone, climbing into the rod- and wire-strung battlesuits that enabled

them to interact with the worlds generated by the Engine. Each exercise was preceded by ritual invocations of the Emperor's protection from any possible taint of Chaos that might arise from contact with the Engine and would end with a Service of Absolution in the Iron Hearts' Chapel of Martyrs. Over time, interest in its use dwindled, fewer Initiates were sent to do battle with the generated simulacra of Daemons, Genestealers, Orks and Eldar and the maintenance team was reduced until only Tydaeus and a Servitor named Barek remained.

'They're just waiting for it to break down,' Tydaeus had complained to Barek on more than one occasion. 'Then they'll simply forget to repair it.'

Barek would nod or grunt, then go on about his business of climbing around and between the Engine's cogs and gears to apply lubricating unguents to the fast-spinning components. Throughout the long hours they spent in each other's company, Tydaeus was the only one who spoke. Hour after interminable hour, he would watch the Engine grind through one of its default settings after another, sink deeper into his chair and dream of the glory that should have been his.

This day had started as every other. Argos, Belladonna, Celadon – the unending cycle of worlds ran its course while Tydaeus, paying scant attention to the scenes being played out across the eye-sockets of the viewfinder, brooded over the opportunities for real combat on behalf of the Emperor which had been denied him by the very Imperium he longed so desperately to serve.

Evangelion. Fortelius. Galatea. Hyperious. Ilium.



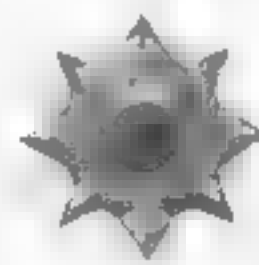
THE INVASION HAD already begun. Tydaeus stared in bewilderment at the figures on a tape scrolling from one of the tutorial calculators: a rout was in progress on a world primarily used to instruct Initiates in the basic elements of planetary defence. Ilium's default setting was one of the most boring of the entire catalogue. Jerking upright in his seat he pressed his eyes to the viewfinder, manipulated its array of handles and dials. Unbelieving, he watched as a tide of Daemons rampaged

across the imaginary homeworld, putting its artfully-rendered citizens to the sword, axe and claw.

'Maybe this is the breakdown they've been waiting for,' Tydaeus muttered as he tore off the most recent diagnostic print-out.

*SIMULATION RUNNING: ILIUM
SIMULATION STATUS: STANDARD
OPERATING STATUS: NOMINAL*

'Your days are numbered,' Tydaeus informed the Mimesis Engine. He felt a certain satisfaction at the prospect of it being junked and of his being re-assigned... but re-assigned to what? Weapons maintenance? Sub-technician in the map room? Every possibility held nothing but further humiliation for a Space Marine who had been deemed unworthy so many years before.



THE AMBUSH HAD been well set. Tydaeus's team detected no trace of their quarry's proximity until the jaws of the trap closed around them.

'Stand and fight, Marines!' the Company's leader cried, before a double hit from the merciless crossfire took him out of the fight.

'For the Emperor!' Tydaeus cried in an attempt to rally the Company, which was already down to less than half-strength. He pumped shell after shell into the surrounding jungle foliage. Shadows moved among the thick-boled trees.

'Tydaeus! Down!' A shout from behind, followed by a bone-jarring impact.

A charge detonated overhead, in the space he had occupied moments before. Half-rolling, half-sliding in the mud into which he had been pitched, he struggled round to face his saviour.

'Seems I owe you, Christus!' Tydaeus acknowledged. His fellow team-member flashed his familiar, gap-toothed grin. 'Still got your bolter?'

'Always, by the Emperor!' Christus replied, patting the weapon.

'Good,' said Tydaeus, as he gathered his legs under him. Lewd sucking noises burst from the mud as he freed himself from its embrace. 'Because there's only one way out of this!'

Tydaeus sprang forward, his bolter dancing in his grip as he fired charge after

charge into the foliage ahead. There was the dull thud of an impact, most likely on a breastplate. A body crashed into the undergrowth. A second thud – another body fell.

‘Right behind you, Brother!’ Christus bellowed, sprinting after Tydaeus, his own bolter dancing in his hands.

Crashing through the cover behind which their attackers had lain in wait, Tydaeus paused. Two bolters lay, abandoned, in the mud. With a crash and shout, Christus joined him.

‘These trees are thick enough for a company to hide behind!’ Christus commented as they scanned the immediate area. What light filtered down from the dense forest canopy served only to throw impenetrable shadows across the spaces between the immense trunks.

‘There!’ Tydaeus jabbed a gloved finger towards a gap between two trees. ‘Movement!’

Christus loosed off a volley. Tydaeus was about to join him in pounding the shadows themselves into submission, when a sudden nagging at the back of his head prompted him to turn.

The figure charged from behind a tree to Tydaeus’s right. Fast. Saw-toothed blade already descending. Too close to bring his bolter to bear.

A short step to the left and a twist of his body took Tydaeus out of the blade’s path. Another short step, this time towards the oncoming attack, and an abrupt, stiff-armed jab caught the attacker full in the face.

Tydaeus was well-braced for the impact, his attacker was not. Boots sliding in the mud, he sprawled backwards. The attacker’s helmet, jarred loose by the power and angle of Tydaeus’s punch, spun away into the shadows.

‘By the Golden Throne, that hurt!’ declared Initiate Caius, shaking his head, then prodding gingerly at his temple, over which a bruise was already beginning to form. ‘I was out of ammunition, so hand-to-hand was my only option. Should have known better when I saw it was you!’

Tydaeus stood over the fallen Initiate. Lifting his bolter, he casually drew a bead on Caius’s rueful expression.

‘Bang,’ Tydaeus said, as the siren indicating the end of the exercise stilled the sounds of combat in the clearing behind them. ‘You’re dead!’

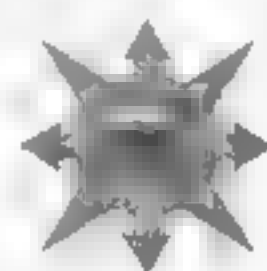
TYDAEUS’S HAND hovered over the intercom, images of long-distant triumphs drifting through his mind.

Caius, always too easy-going, never sufficiently focused on a task, had fallen during his first mission with the Scouts. Christus, the born warrior, was currently leading a Company on the latest of a string of very successful search-and-destroy expeditions.

Every one of the Initiates with whom he had trained had earned the right to receive the Space Marine gene-seed and had gone on to serve the Emperor in the front line of the crusade against the forces of Chaos. Many had perished, earning themselves a place in the Iron Hearts’ Chapel Book of Martyrs. The others continued to win glory for themselves and for the Chapter.

And what of Tydaeus? Tydaeus, Initiate of Honour. Tydaeus, of whom many had spoken as a potential Company Commander, perhaps even Chapter Master, given time.

Ah, yes. Tydaeus. What became of him?



‘YOUR BODY HAS rejected the gene-seed.’

Chapter Medic Hippocrates was blunt. Years spent in the field, dealing with the most appalling battlefield injuries and carving the invaluable progenoid glands from the bodies of fallen Space Marines, had blasted away any pretence of a bedside manner.

Tydaeus sat across from him, stiff-backed, braced for the news but still unable to quiet the rage of his emotions or the flu-like palsy that had gripped him since the third and most recent attempt to introduce the sacred Space Marine gene-seed into his system.

‘As far as we can tell, there’s some problem with your body’s acceptance of the holy seed. Your body rejects it as if to an invading organism. There’s nothing more we can do. Any further attempts to introduce the seed would run the risk of producing intolerable mutations. Report to Captain Borius for re-assignment. That is all.’

With barely a wave of his gnarled right hand, the grey-haired Apothecary brought Tydaeus’s life to an end.

'RE-ASSIGNMENT...' The word surprised Tydaeus even as it passed his lips. His hand still hovered over the intercom. He should contact TechMajor Borus, inform him of the Mimesis Engine's aberrant behaviour and accept the inevitable: the Engine's shut-down and his re-assignment. Ahead of him stretched a future spent watching Initiates prepare for their own moment of glory: their assimilation of the gene-seed and their acceptance into the Brotherhood of the Iron Hearts.

Not yet. Eyes still pressed to the viewfinder, Tydaeus re-focused his gaze on Ilium. There was something about the invaders, about the way they moved as they piled one atrocity after another upon the surface of the unreal planet. The Mimesis Engine was able to generate the apparent form and behaviour of a vast array of life-forms, but, over years spent squinting through the viewfinder, Tydaeus had come to recognise small, apparently insignificant deficiencies in its creations.

Just as a portrait of a man might capture his appearance, hint at the manner of his movements, but fail to record the particularities of his personality, so the Mimesis Engine could not, to Tydaeus's eyes, produce entirely convincing simulacra. Every Ork, Genestealer or Bloodletter an Initiate met on one of the generated worlds was just an approximation of the truth, inevitably – perhaps fatally – incomplete.

As he continued to watch the Chaotic hordes slash their way across the monitors, Tydaeus saw the very inconsistencies of manner and action that he would not expect to see in the artificial enemies of one of the prescribed exercises. A certainty – an impossibility! – began to grow in his mind that these invaders were real.

The outrageousness of the notion warred with his understanding of the relationship between warp space and the material universe. The Mimesis Engine was a part of the material universe, as were the worlds that it generated. Was it so unreasonable to suppose that a confluence of currents in the warp tides could allow a cadre of Daemons access to one of those worlds? The longer he pondered the question, the longer he watched Ilium drown in the blood of its unreal inhabitants, the more certain Tydaeus became of the answer.

Ilium had been subjected to countless imaginary assaults by aliens and Demons – but this time the Daemons were real.

For a moment, a figure appeared, then vanished as Tydaeus panned across yet another scene of utter carnage. Not a Bloodletter. Taller, broader, wearing a more individual suit of encrusted armour. Tydaeus's worked the viewfinder's controls, panned back across the scene, until...

There! Half as tall again as the tallest Space Marine, encased in a suit of cracked obsidian from which hung the trophies of a campaign of unspeakable horrors. From its gestures, it appeared to be directing the actions of the other Daemons. From the crown of its helmet's shallow dome spewed a sheaf of living tentacles. In one claw-gloved hand it held an axe whose shaft would stand higher than any Marine.

Taking his hands from the viewfinder's controls, Tydaeus stabbed sigil-etched buttons, yanked at toggle switches. A low rumbling shook the floor of the annex as whole systems of gears were thrown into reverse, connecting rods withdrawn and re-aligned. It verged on the blasphemous but, if he could trap the Daemons within the Ilium simulation, he could...

He could what? The answer was already there, in the shadows cast by long years of frustration, but he couldn't bring himself to acknowledge it. Not yet.

A printer spool chattered. Ilium had been isolated. Tydaeus ordered another print-out, then another. In the time it took the printer to deliver each new screed of parchment, whole continents went black, overrun by the invading Daemons.

Tydaeus returned his gaze to the horde's foul commander, drawn to the inhuman efficiency of his progress across Ilium, apparently still oblivious of the world's unreality, of the trap that had already shut around him.

As he watched the horde assemble on the desert plain, a new certainty grew in Tydaeus. Here was a province of Hell, trapped within a machine-turned cage of unreality. Here was his chance for glory.

All thoughts of glory were blasted from his mind by the spectacle of the Ritual of Seeding. Had every world that fell before this creature been subjected to this last act of violation? To defeat him would be to exact holy vengeance on behalf of every such planet. A righteous fire blossomed in Tydaeus's chest that could only be quenched by the annihilation of this Daemonic abomination.

The black-clad figure gestured towards the Chaos Gate. The flame of Tydaeus's outrage was doused by a rush of fear. If the Daemons should escape...

The printer delivered its final report: Ilium was secure. Confined within the new alignment of the Mimesis Engine's operating parameters, the Chaos Gate remained immobile. Tydaeus noticed a change in the attitude of the assembled horde. Was it apprehension? Were creatures spawned on the far side of the Eye of Terror capable of feeling fear?

'Time to find out,' Tydaeus muttered, sitting back from the viewfinder and swinging the chair, which was suspended above the floor on its own hinged and jointed armature, towards a row of control panels set against the wall opposite the bank of printers. Via more rune-encrusted switches and levers, he urged into life a section of the Engine which had lain dormant since the last group of Initiates had completed their training exercise on another of the device's worlds. Another low rumbling rippled through the annex. Before he could re-consider what he was about to do, he stepped down from the chair and walked through the door that had swung open as the last switch had been thrown.



LORD OF THE Golden Throne, stand with me in my hour of danger. Make me proof against the taint of Chaos, against which I pledge my life in your service...

As he climbed into one of the battlesuits that hung in ranks in the large chamber adjoining the annex, Tydaeus chanted the Liturgy Before Battle that he had learned as an Initiate. His long familiarity with the suit's design enabled him to close it about his body and hook up the last of the motion-sensing wires without the assistance most Initiates required.

The battlesuit looked absurd – a smooth carapace hanging limply from wires and harness – but Tydaeus knew that, once connected to the Mimesis Engine, he would be encased in an exact copy of a Terminator battle-suit. His heart hammered in his chest and a small voice whispered in the back of his mind, informing him of the insanity of what he was about to do. Ignoring them both, he swung a blank-visored helmet from

its cradle above the suit and lowered it over his head.

Blind within the helmet, Tydaeus breathed deeply to calm his heart and silence the whispering voice. All that mattered now was what he could achieve. He knew that, in the annex, the dials were counting down the remaining seconds of the time he had allowed himself to step into the inner chamber, don the suit, settle the helmet in place. He had selected a full array of weaponry. He had seen the enemy. He knew what he had to do.

Did time stretch this way for every Space Marine? Did the last seconds before battle seem to stretch to infinity? Were their palms sweaty, did their double hearts pound and their breath come in shallow gasps? Tydaeus already felt closer to the Brotherhood that had been denied him.

Still blind. Still waiting. The temptation to remove the helmet and return to the annex had become unbearable when Tydaeus was blinded by the sudden return of his sight. Blinking rapidly, he looked across the glassy plain.

Daemons – hundreds of them! Tydaeus stood a few yards to the rear of the assembly. He had seen their kind thousands of times before, running missions for Initiates. He had watched this cadre since their arrival on Ilium, but nothing could have prepared him for this. The kaleidoscopic variety of sizes and body-types assaulted his mind's sense of what a living thing should be. Some he recognised as having once been human: Chaos Space Marines, once-proud brothers who had sold their souls to the Dark Gods. The individual horror of each Daemon was magnified to a greater power by their number. The wave of unreasoning, destructive hatred that emanated from them was palpable.

Tydaeus struggled to remind himself that, for all their power, they were unwittingly trapped here on a world that could barely be said to exist at all. Even now, Tydaeus could simply pull the plug and they would be consigned to oblivion, unable to comprehend the manner of their defeat.

But that was not why Tydaeus was here. He was here to fight, to bring their leader to his knees and so prove his fitness for a Space Marine's assignment, a Space Marine's respect!

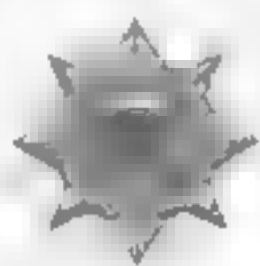
Thus resolved, he fired a volley into the hulking throng, determined to make the

most of the element of surprise. Alerted by the explosive demise of their fellows and baying their surprise, the closely-packed Bloodletters and other atrocities against Nature struggled to turn to face their attacker. Tydaeus strode forward to meet them

Ducking a wild slash from a serrated blade, Tydaeus answered with one of his own. His chainsword bit into Daemon flesh, carved a gaping furrow and left the Bloodletter thrashing out its life on the cracked ground. His first kill! Tydaeus's mind sang as he blasted two more onrushing void-spawn with bolts from his pistol. Another blade rang against his armour, the battlesuit deflecting the strike and allowing its wearer to claim a fourth Daemon-kill.

'For the Emperor!' Tydaeus cried as a warped Ork-Daemon hybrid dissolved before his attack. How long since he last sent up that cry? Kicking free of the despairing grasp of an eviscerated Chaos-Marine that stubbornly clutched at his boot, he waded on into the throng.

'I have arrived, Daemons!' Tydaeus bellowed. 'I am Tydaeus of the Iron Hearts – and I am your Doom!'



STANDING BY THE inactive Chaos Gate, Kargon felt the wave of surprise that swept through his followers' ranks before the images reached him because of the low, animalistic link that they shared. Through their eyes he saw Tydaeus, first as a bobbing figure, glimpsed between the shoulders of other Daemons, the view obscured as they struggled to turn in the confused press, then as an armoured image of death, his chainsword descending, his bolter spitting explosive annihilation.

'Thisss cannot be!' Kargon hissed. The human population of Ilium had been wiped out but, even so, no single Space Marine should be able to cut such a swathe through his troops. For the first time in his long existence, The Seed-Bearer knew the numb confusion of the defender faced by an overwhelming foe.

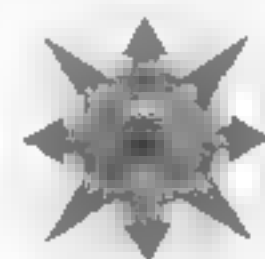
Tydaeus strode on, conscious thought now a distant memory, moving through the ingrained patterns of combat taught him during his years as an Initiate.

Devoid of strategy, the Daemons rushed towards him, their close-packed numbers working against them, causing their weapons to clash, providing Tydaeus with the largest possible target for bolter and chainsword.

Turning to avoid the thrust of a wickedly hooked spear, Tydaeus was surprised to see the Bloodletter that held it knocked aside by another of its kind.

The second Bloodletter casually stomped its fellow's head into the ground as it pursued an attack of its own. A black chain, encrusted with the dried gore of a thousand kills, snaked toward Tydaeus, wrapped itself around the arm he raised in defence. He let himself be jerked forward, his breastplate thudding against the carmine scales that covered the Bloodletter's chest, before firing his pistol point-blank into the Daemon's face. The Bloodletter fell back, its head a smoking ruin.

Tydaeus strode on, noting with surprise that similar internecine skirmishes had broken out around him.



KARGON UNDERSTOOD. Surprise had been supplanted in the minds of his legions by another emotion: a desire to satisfy the hunger that had gnawed at them since Ilium's fall, a hunger that Kargon shared. The souls on which they had fed had proved insufficient; their limbs felt heavy, weighed down with the fatigue of the starving, as if the souls of Ilium's inhabitants had been mere illusions. The sudden appearance of another human offered further nourishment – nourishment that every Chaos-born creature was willing to trample over their fellows to reach.

Illusion: Kargon understood that, also. Altering the alignment of his sensory organs, the Seed-Bearer probed the landscape on which he stood, on which his troops were being cut down like so many stalks of grain. Going beyond mere appearance, he sought some trace of an organising principle. Planes of colour were stripped away by his gaze. A matrix of turned metal revealed itself; cogs, differentials, gears and rods meshed and turned with expertly-machined smoothness to create a pattern that was complex, yet regular. Real, yet unreal...

'A conssssstruction!' Kargon breathed. Now

he truly understood. Illusion, so often the means by which the forces of Chaos had fogged the minds of men, was the foundation of the world that he had conquered, of the souls on which he and his troops had fed. Intent on conquest, they had been unwittingly starving since their arrival. Now this new threat, an interloper from the world outside the illusion, had come to take advantage of their weakened state, had come to claim the Seed-Bearer's soul as his prize.

'That ssshall not be!' Kargon rasped. He stepped towards the nearest rank of Bloodletters, who had by now joined the hungry press. A phalanx of lesser Daemons took to the air and arrowed towards the still-distant attacker. Several Bloodletters turned, distracted from their blood-lust by the presence of their leader. Kargon's axe, designated Soul-Cleaver by the Imperial archivists, was already descending.

Dull surprise registered in the Bloodletter's mind as Kargon's axe buried itself in its chest. A thin pseudopod extruded itself from between two plates of Kargon's armoured glove, slid across its surface and wormed its way into a similar crevice in the axe's handle. The Bloodletter's life ebbed away, drawn along the axe and the slick, gelatinous connection of the pseudopod to swell the first of Kargon's shrunken, famished cells.

Not enough. This, Kargon's first taste of real nourishment since his arrival on Ilium, served only to awaken his hunger to a sharper, more exquisite degree. Levering free his axe, Kargon struck again. A second Bloodletter fell, Soul Cleaver's blade lodged at the junction between shoulder and neck. The Daemon's body jerked spasmodically as its own depleted vitality was sucked away to replenish the strength of the dark god whom it served.

Not enough. Kargon struck again and again, wading through his troops, cutting them down without a thought, feeding, driven by the knowledge that the nameless Space Marine was working his way towards him in similar fashion. When the last wave of his troops fell and he faced his nemesis, the Seed-Bearer would be ready.

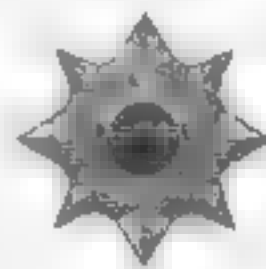


TYDAEUS'S MIND was alight with righteous fury. The plain behind him was piled with the bodies of his victims. If all Daemons were such easy prey, he wondered why it was that they had not already been wiped from the cosmos? If one man could send so many of their number screaming back into the void that spawned them, why had so many planets fallen, so many warriors not returned home during the long centuries of conflict?

Could it be that the Emperor, or those who enacted his will among humanity, were wrong? Could it be that the gene-seed of the Space Marines was not the means by which the invading forces of Chaos would be repelled, but by the inner strength of men such as himself? This would be the lesson he would teach the Imperium: that true warriors were born, not bred like dumb livestock. He would cast the head of the black-armoured desecrator of planets before the High Altar of the Iron Hearts and they would have to listen to him! The old men of the Adeptus Terra might cry blasphemy, but they would be unable to ignore the truth of what he had done.

He had long since exhausted his bolter blowing foul flying Daemons from the sky. Chainsword in hand, its self-cleaning mechanism whining in protest, Tydaeus continued to carve a path through the Bloodletters, severing limbs, bursting chests with cut after cut. Instead of rushing to their doom, the Daemons now pulled back from his advance, parting like a curtain before the hurricane of his approach, until the Daemon that he sought stood before him. The leader of this dark army, their commander and their god.

'Abomination!' he breathed, aware for the first time that his breath was coming in ragged gasps, that his chest burned from the superhuman effort he had expended in fighting his way to this point. But, behind his visor, his eyes were bright with holy fire. Fatigue was nothing. He stood on the threshold of immortality.



KARGON'S AXE sliced through the air, met Tydaeus's sword with stunning impact. Tydaeus staggered back from the blow, boots sliding in the viscera of a recent kill. Dropping to one knee to avoid the

Daemon's savage back-swing, he slashed at Kargon's legs. His whining blade bit, held for a moment, before sliding free. The Seed-Bearer's armour held. Kargon stepped forward, forcing Tydaeus to retreat and parry blow after blow.

How long had they danced thus across the plain, hemmed in by the surrounding Bloodletters and their brethren? How long had the Daemons' cries echoed around his head? Time had lost all meaning to Tydaeus, almost from the moment that he charged at the monolithic black figure, determined to end the fight with one stroke. The Daemon Lord fought with none of the imperious disdain with which he had directed the invasion of Ilium, but his power was still appalling. The cold rage with which he hurled blow after blow against Tydaeus threatened to rob the would-be Space Marine of his will to fight.

'For the Emperor!' In the heat of this last battle, Tydaeus's entire existence had been boiled down to this one cry. Driving himself forward, he feinted, then spun and struck at the hand that held the axe.

A cry like the cracking of the earth issued from the domed helmet of the Seed-Bearer. A fissure had appeared in the obsidian gauntlet. Veined ichor spurted from the wound, splattering Tydaeus's helmet and breastplate. Hope welled up within him and he drove forward once more.

Now it was Kargon's turn to retreat. Tydaeus rained blow after blow against him, anxious to breach the armour that covered the Daemon's vital centre – that ravening maw, that slaving organ of desecration. Kargon's defence seemed to have degenerated into an uncoordinated flailing with axe and free hand. Tydaeus stepped closer. The end, he was sure, was near.

A vice closed around Tydaeus's sword-hand, another gripped his shoulder. His boots kicked at the air as Kargon lifted him from his feet. Too close! In his desire to finish things, he had stepped within the Daemon's reach. Despite his injuries, Kargon's sheer physical strength was incalculable. Soul Cleaver hung forgotten from Kargon's wrist as he drew Tydaeus closer still.

Straining to twist free from Kargon's grasp, Tydaeus still had time to notice that the cracks in the Seed-Bearer's armour were more than mere scars of combat. They pulsed with life, as if the stone-like carapace

was organically connected to the body within. As he watched, the pulses quickened.

With almost geological slowness, Kargon's breastplate cracked, yawned lazily open.

'No!' Tydaeus seemed to hang over a bottomless pit, a fissure that led down into his own heart, to the depths of his own ambition – to his doom, and that of the training outpost in which his terror-stricken body still stood.

Deep within that pit, something stirred and began to snake towards the light.



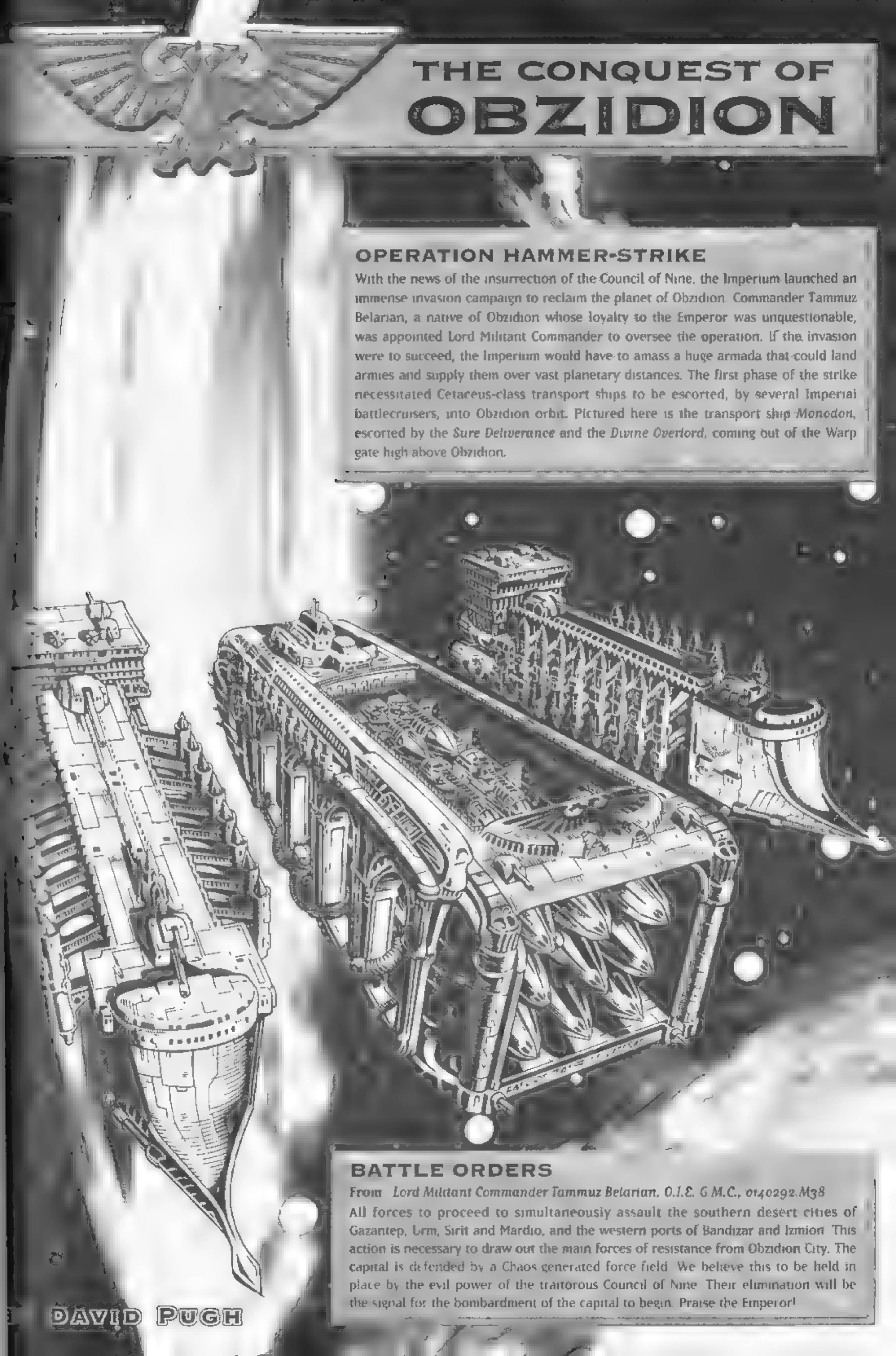
TYDAEUS BARELY FELT the impact as the tentacle punched through his breastplate, fastened on something deep within him and began to feed. He could accept death as the price for his own failure – that, after all, was the warrior's code. It was the knowledge that flooded his mind, even as Kargon emptied him of his soul, that caused him to cry out in anguish. The Seed-Bearer was not interested in his soul, nourishing though it might be after the unsatisfying fare of Ilium's unreal inhabitants and the meagre souls that motivated his followers. Kargon wanted from Tydaeus the one thing he alone was able to provide: a gateway to the material universe, the truth behind the illusion of Ilium.

'Emperor forgive me!' The words, Tydaeus's last human thought, emerged into the silence of the inner chamber before, with a wet explosion, Kargon peeled back the barrier between illusion and reality. Tydaeus's body hung in the air, a twisted blasphemy of blood and bone, as the gash in the fabric of material space grew wider, setting off incursion alarms throughout the outpost.

Kargon stepped towards the connecting door, beyond which lay the annex and, after that, the outpost whose inhabitants were already scrambling in response to the alarms. Behind him, his remaining followers erupted through the gateway, their hunger thickening the air.

'Sssouls!' hissed Kargon, Daemon Lord of Chaos. 'Ssspace Marine sssoulsss!' His fingers flexed around the haft of his axe, the fissure with which he had enticed Tydaeus into his grasp now sealed.

'It isss time to feed!' ●



THE CONQUEST OF OBZIDION

OPERATION HAMMER-STRIKE

With the news of the insurrection of the Council of Nine, the Imperium launched an immense invasion campaign to reclaim the planet of Obzidion. Commander Tammuz Belarian, a native of Obzidion whose loyalty to the Emperor was unquestionable, was appointed Lord Militant Commander to oversee the operation. If the invasion were to succeed, the Imperium would have to amass a huge armada that could land armies and supply them over vast planetary distances. The first phase of the strike necessitated Cetaceus-class transport ships to be escorted, by several Imperial battlecruisers, into Obzidion orbit. Pictured here is the transport ship *Monodon*, escorted by the *Sure Deliverance* and the *Divine Overlord*, coming out of the Warp gate high above Obzidion.

BATTLE ORDERS

From Lord Militant Commander Tammuz Belarian, O.I.E. G.M.C., 0140292.M38

All forces to proceed to simultaneously assault the southern desert cities of Gazantep, Urm, Sirit and Mardio, and the western ports of Bandizar and Izmion. This action is necessary to draw out the main forces of resistance from Obzidion City. The capital is defended by a Chaos generated force field. We believe this to be held in place by the evil power of the traitorous Council of Nine. Their elimination will be the signal for the bombardment of the capital to begin. Praise the Emperor!

DAVID PUGH

CATHEDRALS OF INVASION

Lodgement areas needed to be established so with surety of purpose, the prefabricated planetary assault platforms known as Hexathedrals were constructed to act as launch platforms for fast strike 'Devourer' Imperial Guard drop ships. The assembly work was undertaken by sturdy tractor tugs, under the protection of the mighty battleships. Once assembled, the Hexathedral acts as living quarters, hospital, supply and repair depot for an entire Imperial Guard army plus support personnel. Beneath the platform is an immense planetary bombardment cannon, capable of punching vast craters into Obzidion's surface.

ORBITAL CONSTRUCTION

The illustration to the right depicts a Hexathedral in the process of construction. Sturdy tugs bolt together the massive pre-formed sections; the platforms are ready for action within 24 hours.





SIEGE REPORT

From Admiral Runstal, Hexathedral Nostrum

Date 0150292.M38

To Supreme Commander Belarian

Status Omega one

Further to your order to isolate Obzidion City. Planetary bombardment commenced at 07 00 hours, resulting in the total destruction of the land bridge east of the Orm, effectively cutting off any movement of enemy ground forces from the southern continent. Our fast strike craft continue to patrol the Gulf of Onaz, deterring any naval attempt to come to the capital's assistance.

Now proceeding to embark our loyal Blood Angel Marines. May the Emperor's blessing go with them

HEAVY HITTERS

Extract from *OBZIDION ENIGMA* by Francel Horison

During the course of the invasion of Obzidon, six orbiting Hexathedral assault citadels were assembled in orbit and employed to devastating effect. Their underslung guns, affectionately known as Planet Busters, were called upon to give direct support to the Blood Angels by striking at enemy troop concentrations. Rocket-propelled shells raked the surface, clearing paths for the Space Marine strike craft. More than 520 000 tons of shells pulverised the planet's surface with great accuracy during the first hours of the operation. The number of reported Obzidon casualties, however, was lower than expected, and no reports on the morale of the enemy troops were obtained due to the lack of captured prisoners. However, the offensive power of Obzidon forces must

have been totally obliterated, for after one brief initial flurry no off-world strikes were launched against the Imperium fleet.

LOGISTICS AND STATISTICS

The following table gives a brief indication of the resources available for the invasion and of the striking power available.

Average number of fleet craft with crews available to Lord Militant Commander Belarian on any given date of the campaign

Hexathedral platforms 6

Cetaceus-class troopships 18

Heavy bombers 1,120

Fast strike and shuttle craft 8,906

Support ships 880

Ground attack vehicles 4,377

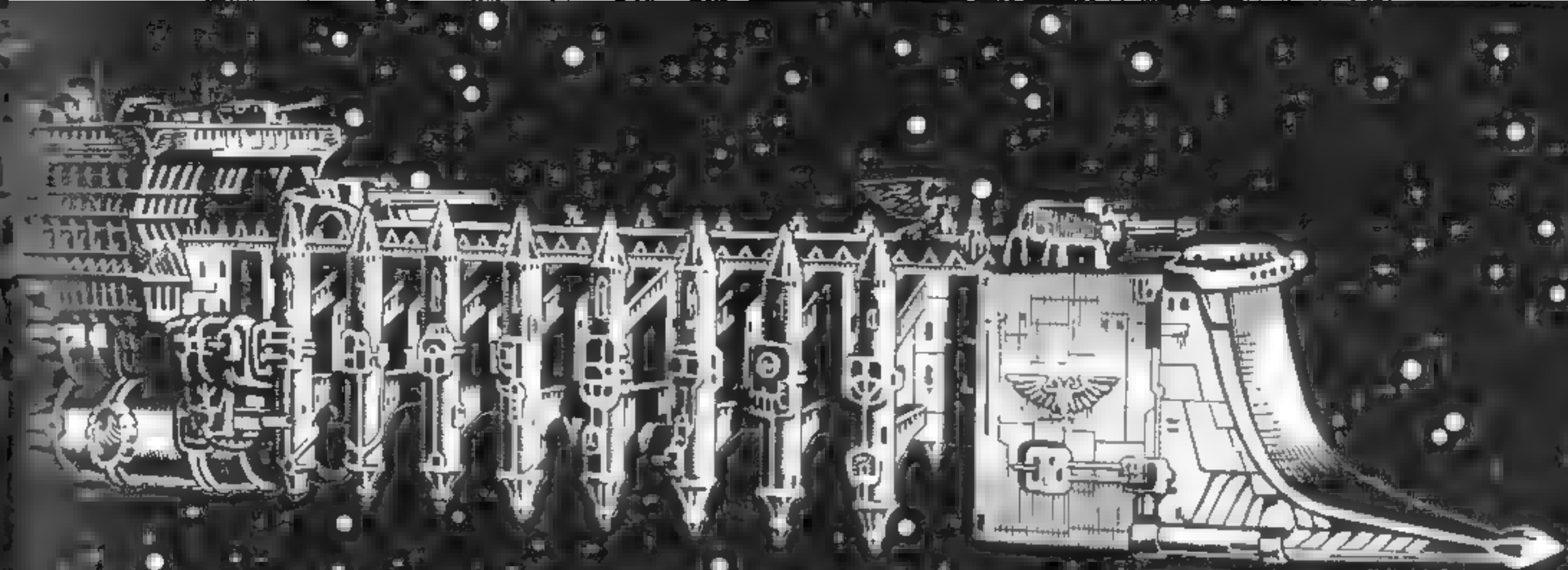
Total platform bombardment
520,354 tons

Total sorties 122 046

Total bombs dropped 1,277,900
tons

Here we see the City Vigilantum receiving Imperial Guard of the Brakanen Vilth

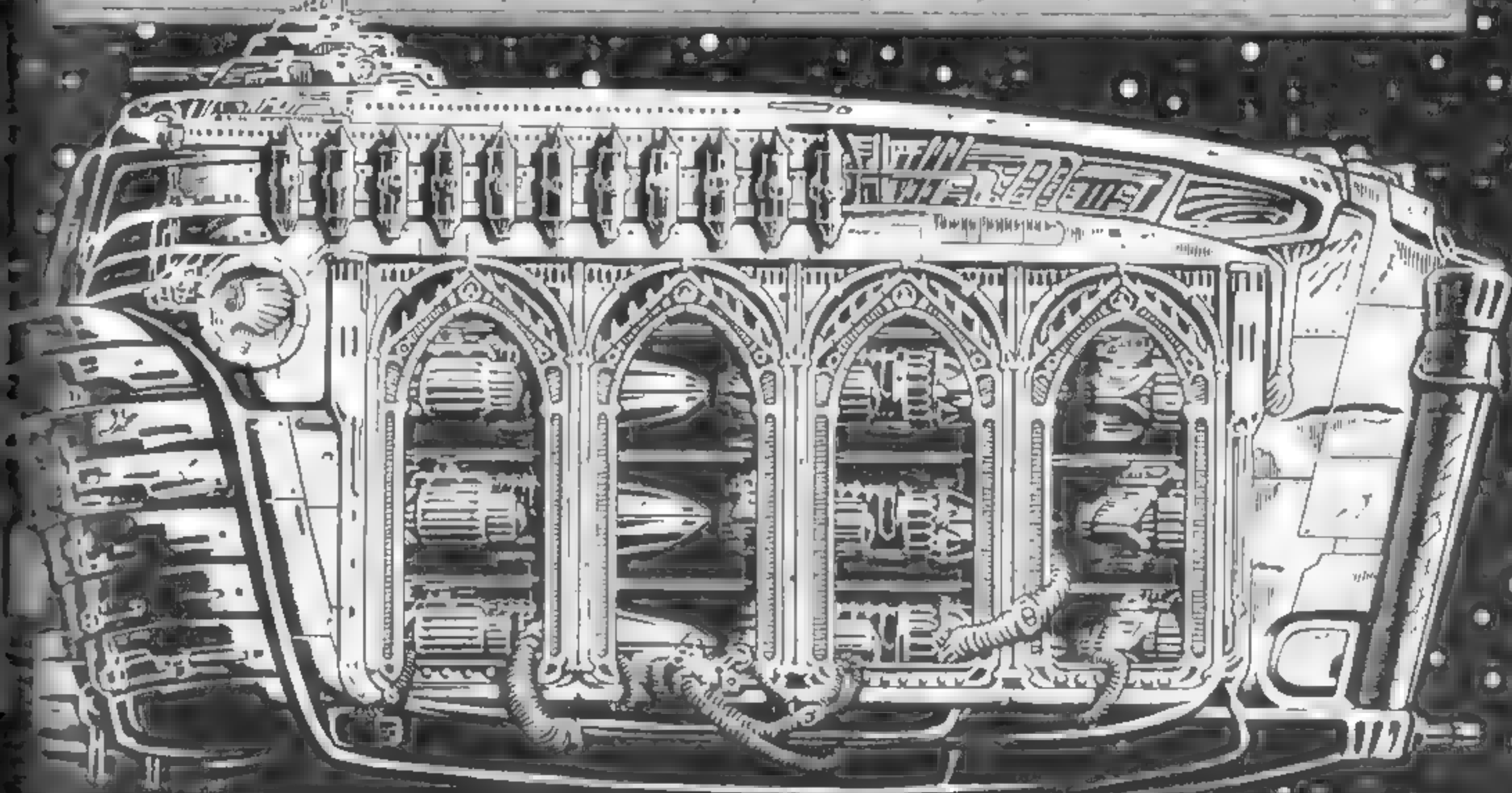




THE INVASION FLEET

Eleven Imperium battlecruisers saw service over Obzidion. Leading the vanguard was the *Divine Overlord*, under the command of Supreme Commander Belarian himself.

The backbone of all fleet manoeuvres was the Minotaur-class tug pictured here. Not only did it act as the fleet's tractor, it was capable of shuttling Ground Attack Vehicles to the surface. Its bulky shape belied its speed and manoeuvrability under fire.



THE BIG TRANSPORTERS

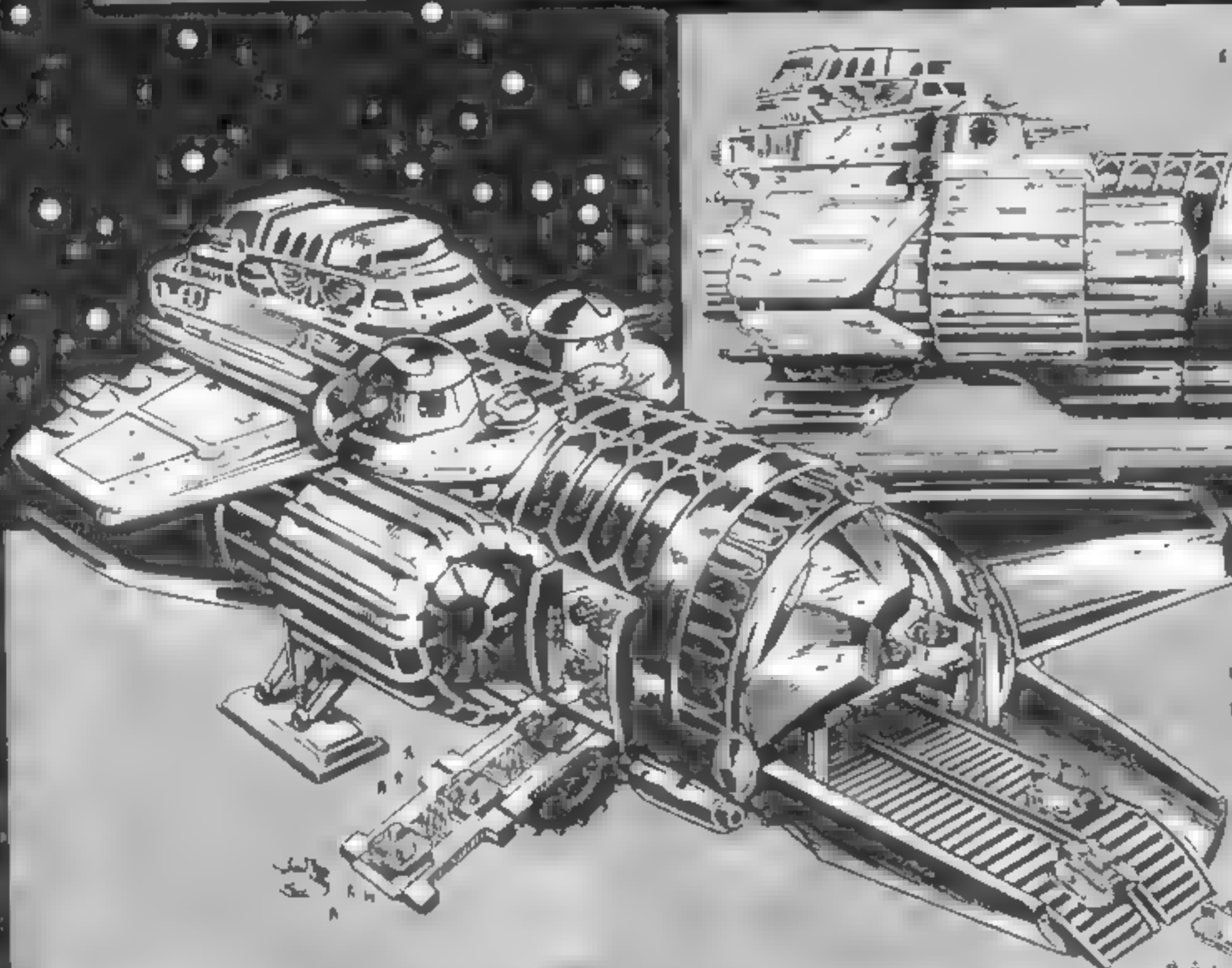
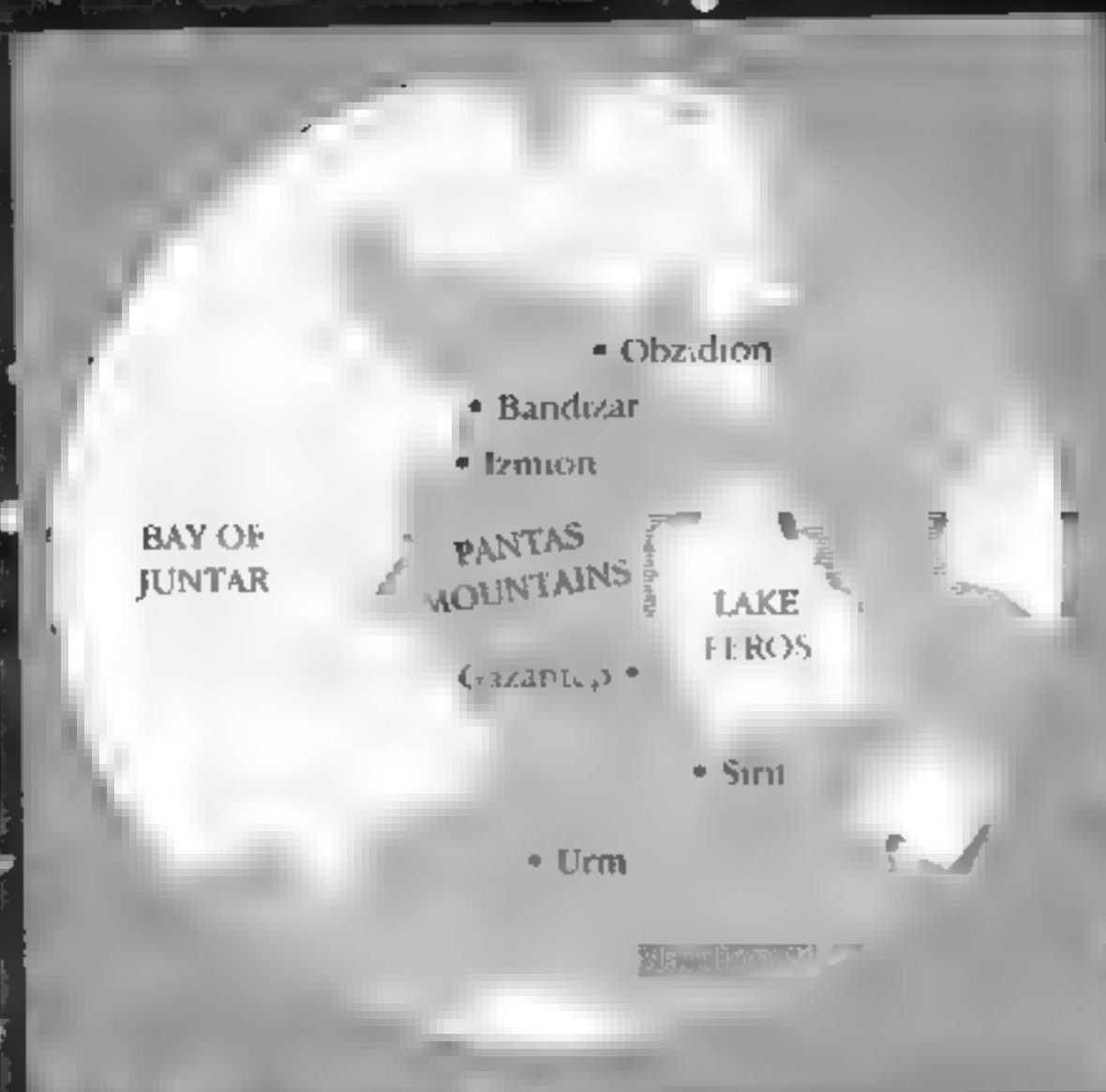
Once again, the use of the vast Cetaceus-class transporter ships, nicknamed 'Whales', sealed the doom of Obzidion, as indeed they have done for many planets since. An entire regiment of Imperial Guard can safely be accommodated within their own drop-ships, stacked and ready to be ejected down onto the planet's surface. Whale ships can also carry smaller vehicles, including strike craft and tugs, along with sections of the mighty Hexathedrales. With three deep decks and multi-armour shielding they provide relatively safe and fast passage through the Warp, assuring the smaller craft remain together for a fast strike offensive. Whales are capable of sustaining severe damage and still operating, as most of the vast ship is simply storage space. During the cleansing of Ritulonis, the Whale ship *Capacitor* suffered 75% structural damage yet returned safely to base.

GROUND REPORT (PHASE ONE)

From: Blood Angel Ground Commander, Ramus Lubero

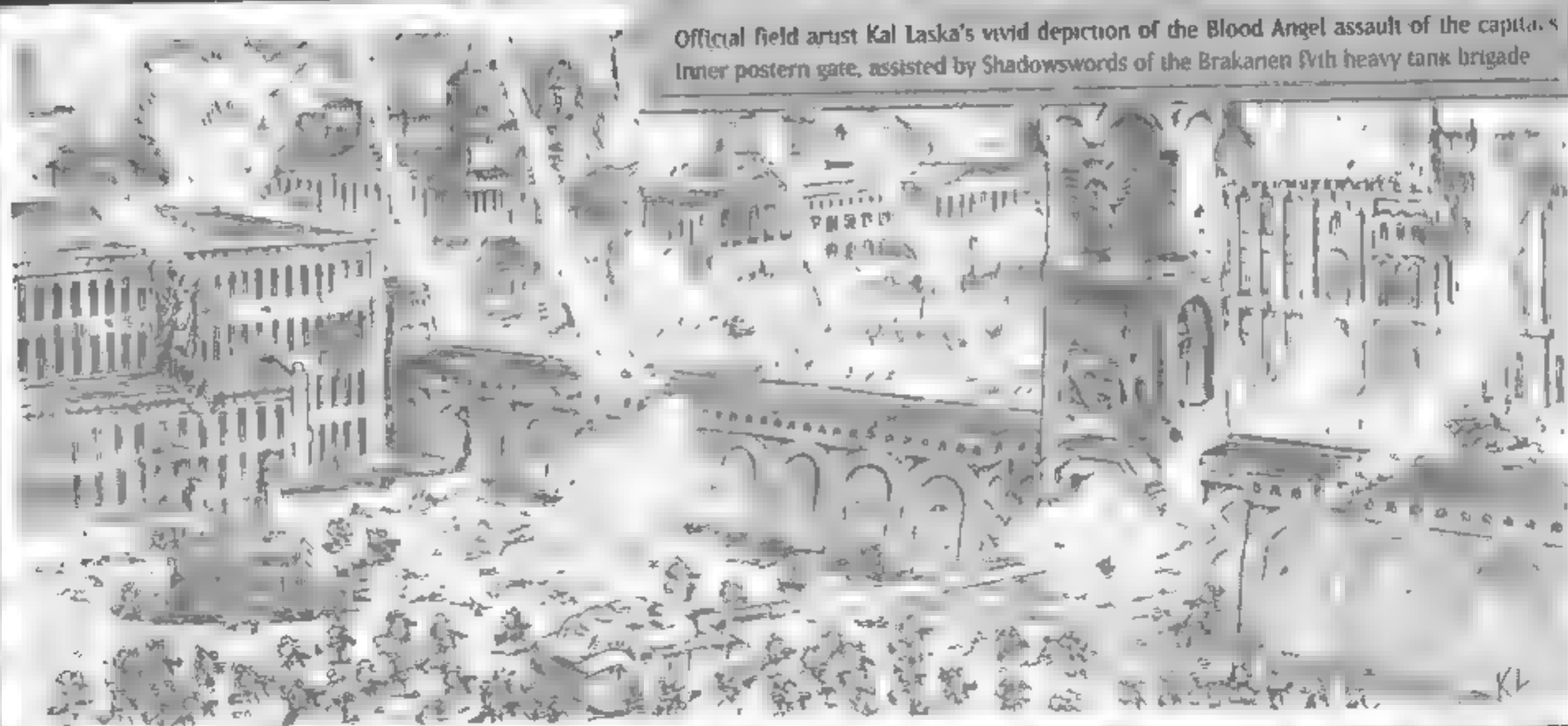
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The first attack caused apocalyptic fires. Fuel supplies stored in the outlying city factories are still burning. Internal communications were cut early in the assault. All port cities and industrial bases have been hit and essential services are severely damaged. The Obzidion Defence Presidium has burned down, all major barracks have been destroyed. Ground resistance has been minimal. It appears that the population had been forewarned of the invasion, hundreds of thousands have fled, presumably to the safety of the mountains and deserts. Small, isolated pockets of armed militia have been the sole resistance so far. It is likely that the bulk of the military are assembling at the capital for a standing battle in defence of the rulers. We will vanquish!



'DEVOURER' IMPERIAL GUARD DROP-SHIP

Armed with two heavy las cannon and ram missiles, the craft can literally punch its way through enemy emplacements. Once through the breach, its uniquely designed nose cone opens like a four-jawed beast. A telescopic catwalk allows rapid access for the Imperial Guard units housed on the upper deck. The lower deck carries the campaign's assault vehicles, tanks and heavy weapons.



Official field artist Kal Laska's vivid depiction of the Blood Angel assault of the capital's inner postern gate, assisted by Shadowswords of the Brakaneen 5th heavy tank brigade

COME THE HOUR, COME THE MAN

Report from the official observer, BRAKANEN CITY WAR DESPATCHES

As I write, the commencement of the conquest of Obzidion City itself is less than two hours away. Our fearless warriors have ensured that all outlying cities have either been destroyed or abandoned and the capital is now totally isolated. The mighty Brotherhood of Blood Angels have been victorious once again, sustaining only minor casualties in return for a truly impressive series of victories. All troops are now in the process of being withdrawn back into the Hexathedrals and troop ships which remain in low orbit around the planet. The entire fleet is now dedicating their weapons to the concentrated bombardment of Obzidion City, a bombardment that will continue, sources close to Fleet High Command say, for a minimum of twenty-four hours. The result will be the utter annihilation of the capital, leaving an irradiated scar as a warning to all who would embrace any but the rule of the Emperor of Terra.

The triumph and the glory of the Obzidion victory must go to Lord Militant Commander Tammuz Belarian O.I.E. G.M.C. A native of the rebel planet, the Commander is quoted as saying 'This is a vindication of those rumours that have been circulating of my involvement in the so-called Obzidion conspiracy. I trust there will be no more foolish talk of any 'Council of Ten'. The destruction of the capital, although regrettable, will break forever the hold that the foulness of Chaos had upon my once-beautiful blighted planet.'



KAL LASKA

Trained soldier and adventurer Laska saw many years fighting for the glory of the Empire, until injured. A gifted painter, he was assigned the role of official war artist for Obzidion campaign. He travelled with the Blood Angels and the Brakanens, finally standing alongside them in the midst of the blood and smoke before the gates of Obzidion City. Throughout the invasion he tenaciously managed to keep a graphic record of his experiences.

THE HIGHEST HONOUR

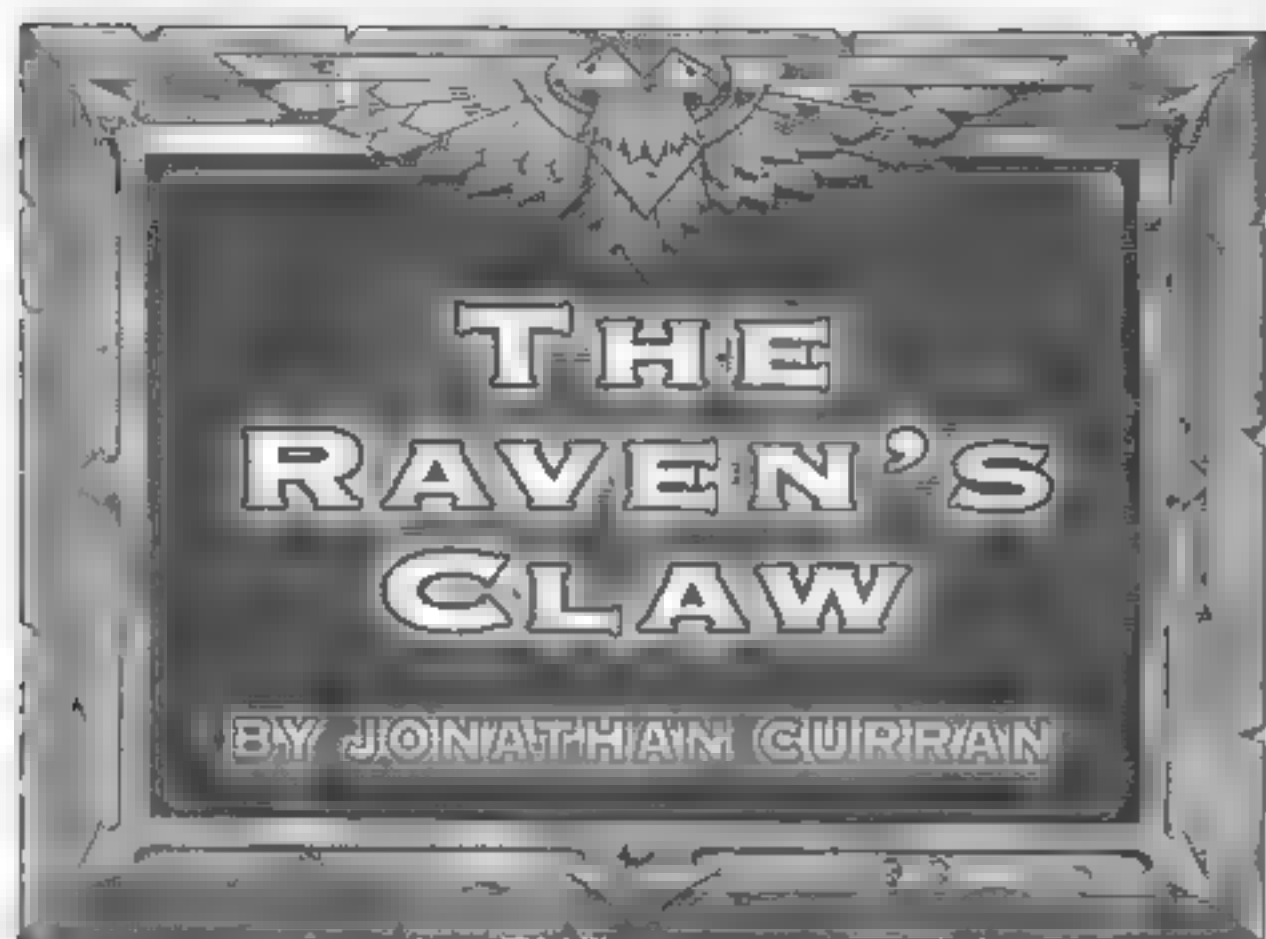
From The Council of High Lords
To Lord Militant Commander Lord Tammuz Belarian

In anticipation of your glorious victory in the Emperor's name upon the fields of Obzidion, we have the greatest pleasure in awarding you the Lordship and governance of the said planet.





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'MY LORD GOVERNOR, I see shadows ahead. I see ravens wheeling, but beyond the shadows there is only darkness.' The man was nervous, wary.

'Are we in danger then, Rosarius? Are all our schemes to come to naught? Look again. Look again!' his master insisted.

'My lord, I— I cannot tell... Wait, there is something, the darkness is clearing... I see fire. No... a star, it is falling in the night... falling from the sky. What does it mean? No, no, wait... it is gone, I can see no more.'

'Then try harder. We must not fail. Too much is at stake here. You've got to protect me until all this is over. This place is full of treachery and I trust no-one. If anyone so much as thinks ill of me I want to know about it. We're taking a massive gamble here, and I want to know that it's going to pay off. And don't worry, when it does, I remember who my loyal servants are. Keep looking — I must know when victory is close.'

Governor Torlin turned on his heels, and stalked over to the windows. He was a short man, but his gait was commanding, almost a swagger. He stood with both hands resting lightly on the sill, looking out over his capital. Far in the distance he could see flashes of light as the defence troops struggled to hold the city's perimeter. The triply insulated glass dampened the sounds, but even from this distance, he could see distortions in his vision as the steady crump crump of artillery caused the plexiglas to vibrate. He couldn't tell whether the explosions were coming closer, but he knew it couldn't be long before the walls were overrun and the city brought to its knees. He started to

stroke the lines of medals on the chest of his gaudy dress uniform, as he always did when he was lost in thought.

Rosarius, a thin, sallow man dressed in dark robes, stared at his back. His milk white eyes, blind since his days at the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, gazed unseeing into the void. He could hear the Governor's breathing, sense his faint odour of tension and fear, feel the intense electrical activity of his brain. He could almost tell what he looked like, so well did he know his aura, but he ignored these false clues to reality, and concentrated instead on the images he could see with his inner eye. Far beyond the window, he could feel the desperation of the Guard holding the walls, feel the determination of the attackers, their mad lust for battle as they threw themselves against the defenders. He sent out fingers of thought, searching for pathways to the future, like tendrils, snaking their way into possibility. He searched for clues to potential outcomes, the easiest way to victory, the conclusion of their plans. He shook his head in frustration — whichever way he looked, all he could see was darkness, and stars falling from the sky.

In the distance, high in the sky, a flash of light amidst the orange and red bursts of plasma and high explosive caught the Governor's attention. Sunlight on metal, moving fast. He followed the object downwards, until it disappeared from view, leaving a thin trail of scorched air behind it from its white hot entry shield.



THE DROP SHIP fell out of the sky like a burning comet. Inside the hold, a hundred men struggled to stay upright, holding tightly onto the steel cords that held them fast against the wall. The ship rocked as anti-aircraft fire exploded like deadly orange flowers around it and servo motors struggled to keep the ship upright against the buffeting gale of explosions and shock waves.

Altitude ten thousand feet and counting. The voice was metallic and harsh.

Vero stood still, his feet apart, bracing himself against the wall, willing his mind to slow, to calm down. Around him men groaned as the rapid descent caused their ears to bleed and their senses to spin. His head felt groggy and painful from the changes in pressure caused by their fall. It was dark, the only light a dirty red glow from the power room. The heat was almost tropical and the air was thick with sulphurous fumes from the badly regulated engines.

Altitude five thousand and counting.

An explosion thumped the outer shell of the ship with a giant's fist and span it around violently like a cork in a whirlpool. Vero could hear bones snapping as bodies jerked against the cables holding them to the walls. The dim red lighting flickered twice, then seemed to stabilise itself.

Altitude two thousand and...

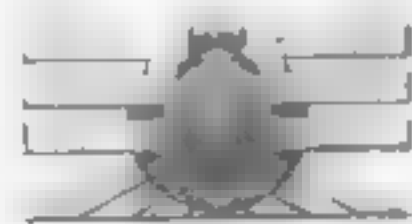
The ship hit the broken ground with a jolt that forced the pneumatic shock absorbers to groan and wheeze like an asthmatic old man. Vero felt as if his spine was being pushed up through the top of his skull. His muscles automatically reacted to the sudden feeling of heaviness as the planet's gravity took over abruptly from the weightlessness of freefall.

He moved his arm and the bindings that bound him fast to the wall automatically increased resistance around his wrist, limiting his movements. His wrists were chafed raw where the tight steel bonds had cut into his flesh, and his body ached from sitting motionless, thrown around by the violently descending craft.

It had seemed like hours since he'd woken, an eternity in the dark, hearing the engines rumble. Time in his own head had lost meaning and focus, he felt confused and disorientated. His head felt heavy, full of strange images that came unbidden in the near-darkness. His memory was restless. He couldn't remember being captured, and he couldn't think of any reason why he should be bound up in this manner. He struggled to remember how he had come to be here, chained up in a plummeting ship heading only Emperor knew where.

The first thing he remembered was waking up confused, unable to even remember his own name, but he had seen

a single glistening word tattooed on his forearm – *Vero* – and assumed that that was his name. Looking around now at the similarly tattooed men around him, he felt that his guess was correct. Some of the men seemed to know each other and as they woke up, greeted each other with rueful smiles and shaking heads. A low buzz of conversation started up in parts of the hold, others were silent. He'd questioned a couple of them, but they hadn't known who he was. He didn't recognise his clothes – nondescript khaki fatigues – and even his own body looked strangely unfamiliar. His thick-set hands were scarred across the knuckles, but his legs looked strong and sturdy through the rough cloth. But he did not know them as his own.



THE FAR WALL cracked opened, harsh white light spilling across the men. A shadow fell in front of the door, and a figure appeared. The newcomer was hefty and grizzled. His dull brown uniform was torn and a dirty bandage covered most of his head. He pressed a button on his belt unit and the steel bonds holding the prisoners against the wall relaxed. The cuffs opened, allowing them to rub life back into their limbs. The man moved into the hold and aimed his electro-prod at the nearest captive, lying recumbent on the floor. The other man's body jerked as the electrode touched his torso, but he didn't get up. Whatever fate awaited them on this planet, some, at least, had mercifully been spared.

'Come on, you pigs, move it! Out, out, out!' the burly man shouted at them, his accent harsh. Other guards appeared, brandishing weapons at the men. Slowly, a ragged line started to form. Vero, struggling to get up through the burning cramp in his legs, found himself beside a huge bear of a man, stripped to the waist, fluorescent tattoos glistening on his thickly muscled neck and arms. Vero stumbled as he approached the ship's ramp, and the man caught his arm, preventing him from

falling. He grinned at Vero, though much of his mouth was hidden behind a shaggy, ginger-brown beard. Almost concealed beneath the thick hairs on his arms, Vero could read the word 'Whelan', and he nodded his thanks.

'It's the sedatives they give you for the journey,' Whelan muttered to him quickly. His voice was deep, almost a growl. 'They make you a bit unsteady on your feet, and that's also probably why you don't remember anything. Trust me, I've seen it before. You can't remember anything now, but it'll come back.'

Vero didn't have time to ask where Whelan had seen it before. The big man seemed to know a lot more about what was going on than Vero himself did.

The faint light became much brighter, causing Vero to shield his eyes from the glare. He realised that it was only weak sunlight, but it seemed strong to him after so much time locked in the darkness of the hull. The sky was a watery grey, and a light drizzle was falling, quickly wetting Vero's dark hair through. For a moment it was quiet. A soft breeze blew, and it felt like the breath of heaven. Vero stretched, flexing his muscles where the cruel bindings had cut into his flesh. He winced as the raw weals opened again, the fresh wounds livid on his olive skin. Despite the inactivity of the trip, he still felt strong and fit. Behind him, the drop-ship sat on the pitted ground like a large black beetle, towering over the people standing underneath, sheltering from the rain beneath its black armoured carapace.

Then the shelling started again.

The men all ran from the cover of the drop ship, the crashing of shells drowning out the sounds of their feet. Vero felt as if he was running in a vacuum. He couldn't feel his legs, cramped as they were from the journey, his ears deafened by the pounding of the incoming shells. The guards were herding them towards a low building built from crude concrete. Vero and Whelan stopped in front of it, with the rest of the prisoners, shifting their feet to try and restore circulation.

'Whelan,' Vero began, looking around him at the motley assortment of soldiers, 'where in hell are we? And what am I doing here? Do you know me?'

The larger man looked pointedly at the tattoo on Vero's arm.

'Vero, is it? Well, I don't know you, but you've answered your own question.' He looked grim. 'We are in hell. It doesn't matter a damn what planet we're on. All you need to know is that you're part of the Fourteenth Esine penal battalion. The 'Holy Fourteenth', they call us, but the Emperor alone knows why. Are you telling me that you really don't remember anything at all? You don't even remember how you came to be on the penal ship in the first place?'

Vero shook his head. A couple of other men strode over to where they were talking. Whelan smiled, the gap-toothed grin splitting his shaggy beard in two.

'Well, look who we have here. Which sorry rock did you two crawl out from under? I didn't see you on the ship when I was cruelly shaken out of my beauty sleep.' Whelan greeted the newcomers by knocking his knuckles against theirs.

'Vero,' Whelan continued, still smiling. 'Let me introduce you to a couple of the dumbest dirtbags around. This here is Oban. In his time he's done for assaulting a senior officer, second-grade treason, heresy.... Oh,' he added at a scowl from Oban, 'make that reformed heresy – this guy's now one straight up, down the line catechismic fellow.'

'That's right,' Oban affirmed, nodding his head vigorously. He was a sharp-featured man, with a broken nose that seemed almost too big for his face. Oban held out his clenched fist chest high to Vero, and after a second, Vero knocked his own knuckles against it. Oban smiled. He looked like he was about to say something, but Whelan interrupted him.

'Me and Oban are old hands here. How many tours we done now, Oban? Six all told I think, including this one.'

Oban sucked in his breath. 'Let's call it five, Whelan. We'll make it six when we're off this dustbowl in one piece. Emperor willing.'

'And this here is Creid.' Whelan pointed at the second man, a tall, rangy figure in battered fatigues, who grinned at Vero from behind a pair of blast goggles. 'I don't even know where to start with this

guy. You name it, he'd done it. Law of averages says he should be dead, the amount of tours this guy's had to do. But some people are just born lucky, I guess. Eh, Creid?

'You said it, brother.' Creid pulled his goggles up onto his forehead to peer at Vero. Creid's right eye had gone, and a crude bio-implant glittered coldly in the socket. Creid noticed Vero's somewhat startled look, but did not seem to take offence. 'Some crazy smuggler took my first eye during the battle for Sonitan VII – stray blaster shot,' Creid volunteered. 'The docs said I was lucky it wasn't my whole head that got blown away, but they patched me up good and proper. Said it was my due reward for bravery.' He shook his head at the memory.

'Silence!'

A path suddenly appeared through the throng for the man who spoke. He swaggered through the crowd of men, a bulky plasma pistol banging against his lean thigh as he moved. A hush fell on the group as he turned to face them.

'I am Commander Bartok, and I am senior officer here. I will be commanding you for this little fracas.'

The officer was young, probably less than twenty – this was most likely his first command. Despite his strong words and careful swaggering walk, he looked inexperienced and nervous. He was tall and slim, boyish even. Neat sandy hair was brushed down smartly over a broad forehead.

Whelan muttered something about 'damned rookies' under his breath, and Vero knew just what he was thinking.

'OK, you lot, this is the end of your journey,' Bartok continued in a voice plainly unused to being raised. 'Where you are doesn't matter, but I'll tell you why you're here. This Imperial outpost is under attack, and we're still waiting for reinforcements. In the meantime, the Imperium has seen fit to send you lot to help us, and empty its prison ships at the same time.' He stroked his officer's insignia as he spoke, as if to reassure himself of his authority amongst so many men. 'I'll be blunt. I don't like penal battalions – you're all scum as far as I'm

concerned – but I don't have any choice in the matter. You're here and you're going to fight.'

Vero looked around. There were more men than he could easily count. Many of them were prisoners such as himself, but still more were Imperial Guardsmen, dressed in standard grey uniforms, with the symbol of a purple glove on their armbands. A purple glove... it meant nothing to Vero; he had no idea which planet he was on, let alone which units he was meant to be fighting with. The officer continued.

'Listen up! Our job is to defend the perimeter. And don't think of trying to escape – there's nowhere to go. If the enemy catches you, they'll kill you – and if I catch you, you'll wish they had killed you. The Governor's Psyker himself has foreseen victory for us, and he's the best telepath in this system – nothing gets past him, so we have got nothing to worry about.'

Men passed through the group, distributing lasguns and combat knives. Vero took the weapons he was given, turning the unfamiliar shapes over in his hands. The lasgun's metal and plastic felt strange, but as he turned the butt and grasped the handle, his hands slid into place, seemingly of their own volition, and his finger caressed the trigger. It just felt right somehow. Vero shifted his weight around, rocking gently on the balls of his feet and flexing his elbows until he felt totally comfortable toting the weapon. He checked what he somehow knew was the power gauge, and flicked the safety catch on and off, noting everything. Whelan glanced at him curiously.

'Used one of these before?' he asked.

'I don't know... I don't think so.'

'You seem to know what to do,' the other man said with a shrug.

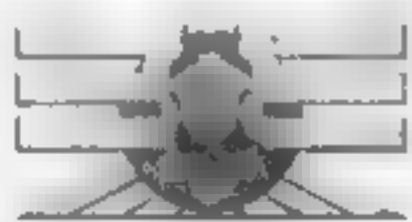
Vero looked down at his hands. He felt his muscles heave, and as he looked at his fist, he saw the tendons stretch and become hard. His knuckles, when he touched them, were like steel. He felt a surge of adrenaline pump through him and strength flood through his body. Strange thoughts filled his head. Marble corridors, skies bright with stars, the low hum of

machinery. He stood stock still, trying to latch onto the thoughts, but they fluttered away from him, dark as ravens' wings.

'Right, you sorry lot, lock and load, and let's go and get ourselves some action!' Bartok was yelling. 'You four,' he finished, pointing at Whelan's little group, 'you're with me. You,' he said to Oban, 'you're comms. Let's move out!' One of the Imperial Guardsmen handed Oban a comms-unit, and he hefted it onto his back without complaining.

Whelan scratched his beard thoughtfully, and looked at Vero. 'Come on, we'd better shift our butts, or else we're gonna get a bolt in the back of the neck for lack of zeal. I reckon that kid commander's dying to take a pop at somebody, and if we're in the way we're as likely to get it as anyone else. These sort of people are famous for fragging their own side as often as the enemy's. Stick with us. As I said, this is my sixth penal tour of duty. I've survived so far, even been commended for valour once. Stay close and you'll get through alright.'

Vero didn't seem so sure, but the feel of the weapon in his hands, at least, was reassuring. They set off behind Bartok, jogging alongside the other prisoners from the drop-ship, heading for where the sounds of battle were loudest.



'ROSARIUS, YOU FOOL, are you a telepath or are you not? Have you served me so faithfully for so long, only to have your powers fade at the moment when I need them most? What is the use of shadowy images, when what I need are facts!' Torlin's voice could not disguise his furious rage. He swept a pile of papers off his enormous desk, sending them fluttering around the chamber.

'My lord, for a second I saw something, but then it was gone. This darkness troubles me more than I can say. For a moment, I saw the raven again, then stars, marble halls. And now nothing. I am as blind now in the ether as I am in your world.'

'You fool, Rosarius, there is nothing there for my victory is certain. I don't need for you to start getting the jitters now. You're an old man; maybe you should leave the predictions of war to me. We go on.'

'My Lord, I beg you...'



VERO'S UNIT arrived at the perimeter defences to find themselves in the midst of a ferocious firefight. Hundreds of men crammed makeshift concrete battlements and the roofs of bunkers, and beyond these positions Vero saw a sea of rubble where weeks of artillery bombardment had shattered the outer edges of the city. The air buzzed with laser fire and the roar of heavy weapons. The sounds of battle raged in his ears. He felt strong and strangely unafraid.

For the first time he could see the enemy up close. As far as he could tell, they were human like him, and from the number of casualties on this side of the wall, well armed. As they moved into position, a man he didn't know, standing right next to Oban, was hit by enemy auto-cannon fire. One moment he was firing into the distance, the next there was an roar and tatters of the man's flesh covered them. Vero wiped the mess from his face, tasting the metallic tang of blood on his tongue. He followed Whelan's example and ducked down behind the crenellated walls. The pair of them began firing out across the ruins.

Across this nightmare landscape, Vero could see hundreds of bodies, scattered and broken, limbs cut from bodies by powerful laser fire or ripped apart by the relentless artillery. The ground shook every time another shell landed, and it seemed as if the corpses were dancing on the ground, their arms and legs jerking in time to the exploding shells.

The stones before them shook. Looking down, Vero saw gloved fingers clutch the stone of the parapet in front of him, and before he could react, the largest man he had ever seen swung over the wall

confronted him. Dressed from head to toe in dull grey battle armour, he swung a huge chain-axe at Vero's unprotected head. Vero heard the rasping of the axe's teeth chewing the air as it swung towards him. Acting from pure instinct, he jumped backwards and sideways, putting space between himself and his assailant. The axe missed Vero's head, but the whirring blade shattered the barrel of his lasgun. Splinters of hot metal flew in all directions. One hit Vero's forehead, and blood welled into his eye, making him blink. Vero dropped his useless weapon, and pulled his combat knife from its boot sheath. He dropped into a crouch, balancing his weight on the balls of his feet. Somewhere deep inside his own mind, Vero found he was watching himself with a mixture of admiration and alarm.

Trying to concentrate, he ducked under the next swing and threw himself at the enemy, inside the arc of the chain-axe. He could smell stale sweat and blood, but as his opponent staggered back, Vero forced the steel point of his knife in towards the man's chest and pushed hard, shattering ribs and severing muscle.

As he plunged the ice-tempered blade deep into his opponent's chest, Vero felt something take over him. Some savage spirit possessed him and he twisted the blade, feeling it bite into soft tissue, then brought his knee up to push himself away from the falling body, pulling the knife with him. The man gasped and died in front of him on the broken ground, his madly staring eyes clouding over as blood gouted from the wound in his shattered ribcage.

Vero staggered back as sensations flooded through him. He didn't remember ever having learnt to use a combat knife, yet at the precise moment the crazed man had leapt at him, he had felt something take over him, some instinct, some training, that had enabled him to pull the knife from his boot, twist it in his hand and plunge it fatally into the chest of his opponent.

He opened his mouth and yelled, a guttural howl of triumph – and he felt a sudden flash of memory illuminate his mind. He struggled to hold on to it, but it slipped away like a sump-eel, slithering

away from his conscious will, leaving him none the wiser. But for a second, he had seen in his mind's eye the image of stars burning behind a huge glass window, heard the sound of feet rustling on polished stone, and a smell like... like something he couldn't put his finger on. Then it was gone and the moment passed.

He sensed movement to his left and wheeled around, snatching up his dead assailant's chain-axe. A soldier had vaulted the parapet, a knife gripped between broken teeth as he used one hand to pull himself up and over the concrete wall. In the other he waved a battered bolt pistol. The man was covered in scars, and his hair stuck up in tufts all over his head. They looked at each other for less than a heartbeat... then Vero clenched the lever on the weapon's handle, and the chain-axe snarled into life. He lunged, and there was a deafening scream as his opponent fell gasping into the mud, arm severed at the shoulder.

Suddenly, as if at a signal, the walls before them were being scaled by tens of warriors, swarming over the parapet. Shocked, Vero jumped back, and looked around for his companions. He saw Whelan laying down a withering blanket of las fire, as Creid and Oban lobbed frag grenades that Commander Bartok was tossing over to them from the bottom of the wall, forming a human chain of destruction.

And then Vero was fighting for his life, swamped by attackers, carried along by the press of enemy bodies. He lost sight of his comrades for a few moments as he swung his stolen chain-axe in a whirling figure of eight before hurling it at the closest foe, cleaving his skull in two. He picked up a laspistol from a fallen Imperial Guardsman, quickly checking the power cell, and cleared himself some breathing space. Grabbing Whelan's shoulder, he shouted above the din.

'Where's Bartok?'

'Gone!' came the answer in a growl.

'Dead?'

'No chance. Run off!' Whelan looked pale, obviously sure that his sixth tour was turning into his last.

Vero assessed the situation. 'Fall back!'

he shouted at the others. They looked at him suddenly, and he was momentarily confused, unsure where the sudden note of command in his voice had come from. They began to retreat, using the ruined walls as cover. Enemy artillery shells sailed over their heads in the direction of the city, the eerie whistle making the men shudder. Vero grabbed Creid by the shoulder, as he lobbed his final grenades.

'Come on!' he shouted, pulling the man away, 'fall back, follow me.'

They did so, suddenly surrounded by fleeing guardsmen, making for the cover of the buildings, fiery laser shots stabbing the darkness behind them. Vero lost sight of Creid in the confusion, swept away in the general rout, and he prayed silently that he would escape with his life.

There was a roaring noise next to them and Oban stumbled, his legs seeming to give way under him.

'Whelan, help me!' Vero shouted, slipping on the blood-slick ground. The larger man grabbed Oban's arms and helped Vero drag him towards a ruined building nearby. They may all be dead men, with no one to bury them after this debacle was over, but Oban was a comrade-in-arms; besides, he had the comms unit, and there was no way any of them were going to get out of this mess alive if they lost all contact with command.

They made it through a burnt doorway that led into some sort of warehouse. Molten plastic fell from the ceiling in droplets of lethal rain. Whelan and Vero put Oban down and leant against the wall, panting from both fear and exhaustion.

Vero ran one hand through his hair as Whelan knelt to examine Oban. When Whelan stood up again there was blood on his hands, and a look of concern on his bearded face.

'What's the score?' Vero asked warily.

'Still hanging in there, but I don't think he's gonna last much longer. Both legs are shattered, and he's losing blood faster than I could hope to stop it. I'm surprised he's got this far.' Whelan looked around, eyes full of panic. 'What the hell are we going to do now?'

Vero shook his head. He hefted up Oban's comm unit, but the cheaply mass-

produced unit was broken, the casing cracked and scored by the explosion. He threw it down in disgust and sat down wearily on a slab of rubble. The sound of shellfire was still in his ears. He rubbed his sore eyes, feeling the sting as acrid smoke was rubbed into them from his face. A water bottle lay half-hidden by rubble, no doubt dropped by a fleeing soldier. Vero sniffed the contents cautiously and then swigged at the brackish water inside. He tried to remember the thought that had entered his head as he killed the enemy soldier, but it was gone for good. He cursed. His memory was clear since coming to this planet, but as for what had gone before – nothing. He closed his eyes and tried to retrace his steps since arriving, searching for some clue as to who he was and what he was doing.

In his mind's eye, he saw movement: a tracked vehicle making its way towards them. Could it be safety, or the enemy? He couldn't tell, the image was unclear. He felt as if something was happening just beyond his reach.

'What is it?' Whelan asked him, looking concerned. 'Can you hear something? What's happening?'

In the corner of the room, Oban moaned, and blood ran in streams from his mouth and nose, but Vero hardly noticed. He could hear the sound of a raven cawing. He saw a face swimming in front of his eyes. Grizzled grey hair, arrogant, aristocratic eyes, some sort of uniform, medals. He remembered how his strength had returned so quickly after landing on the planet, despite his weakness on the ship. He remembered how he had mastered the weapons, his instinctive fighting when attacked at the wall. He remembered the hardening of the tendons in his hands and his fingers twitched. And then, nothing. His mind went blank, and all he could see was the ruined building they were hiding in, and Whelan kneeling next to Oban.

'Whelan,' Vero said in a thick, pleading voice. 'Something's happening to me.'



‘MY LORD, the situation is getting too dangerous. For a second I almost saw something, but now I can see no outcome for our strategy except destruction. We must escape, and soon.’

‘But the rebels are so close, how can we fail? Everything is proceeding exactly as we planned it. What can now go wrong?’

‘My Lord, even in a psychic darkness, I can usually see something, some glimmer of intent, of the future. Here I can see nothing.’ Rosarius’s voice was cracked with strain. ‘It is true that my powers cannot see danger ahead of us, but that is why I have cause for worry. I have never had my second sight so blinded. There are futures hovering on the edge of my vision, but there is a cloud, like ink in water, confusing, blocking everything. If I could foresee our doom, that at least, would allow me to plot a course away from that outcome. But there is nothing.’

‘Then we will leave for the bunker. It will be safer there. Perhaps I was foolish returning to the city, but I wanted to be there to watch as the city fell.’

Rosarius shook his head at his master’s egocentricity. Pressing a button on the Governor’s barren desk, he spoke into the comlink.

‘Sergeant, prepare the Governor’s personal transport. We’ll be there in a few minutes.’ As the two of them turned to leave, Rosarius reflected, not for the first time, on the limits of his own psychic powers in not forewarning him of the ill-luck of his appointment as personal advisor to Torlin.

Leaving the ornate double doors standing open, they clattered down the grand staircase, not trusting the lift. Lights flickered as the generator struggled to cope with the demands of the power shields protecting the Governor’s official residence.

Under the palace, the Governor’s personal liveried Chimera armoured personnel carrier was belching black smoke, causing Rosarius to wheeze. Torlin prayed that the inefficiencies of his governorship hadn’t extended as far as his own personal transport, and that the mechanics had added the extra side armour as he had demanded. His bodyguard, thirty hand-picked soldiers of

impeccable loyalties, snapped to attention as he appeared. He nodded at them curtly and waved a vague salute. While the Governor and Rosarius climbed into the Russ, strapping themselves into the seats, the bodyguard piled into two Leman Russ battle tanks. The driver sealed the hatch behind them. To Rosarius it sounded like the closing of a coffin.

The driver gunned the engine, and they lurched forward, nearly jolting Governor Torlin’s head from his shoulders. ‘For pity’s sake,’ he growled at the driver, ‘be more careful. I want to get out of here alive.’

The Chimera, with its escort of tanks, drove slowly through the burning city, slowing often to manoeuvre around ruined buildings and shell-pocked roads. The light outside was made eerie by the many magnesium flares sent up by the spotters, but the sound of small arms fire had faded. The Governor didn’t know whether this was a good sign or not. Even through the vehicle’s filters, he could smell the smoke from the burning buildings, the stench of corrosive chemicals, burning plastic, and, faintly, the odour of charred flesh as the victorious rebels lit their celebration pyres. His city was deserted, its citizens long fled. Torlin listened with half an ear to the sound coming from the comlink with their escort, and chewed his nails thoughtfully. Rosarius was slumped against his seat, seemingly lost inside his robes.

‘Fury One, we have snipers point two zero zero. Over.’

‘Fury Two, I see them.’

They could hear the ricochet of shells bouncing around the armoured hide of the APC, and then the returning rattle of bolter fire.

‘Snipers neutralised.’

‘Fury Base, we are on our way, ETA thirteen minutes and counting. Over.’

‘Receiving, we are awaiting your arrival. Keep us updated. Over and out.’

Suddenly, Rosarius sprang bolt upright, his eyes crazy with fear. ‘My Lord!’ he exclaimed. ‘I see fire, fire from the sky!’

The comm link from the lead Leman Russ screamed, ‘Incoming, incoming!’ The explosion drowned out the rest of the voice.

THE BLAST ROCKED the ruined building where the two survivors were holed up, dislodging great chunks of plaster and rubble from the ceiling. Vero crept towards the ruined window, keeping his head back for fear of sniper fire. Peering across the wrecked boulevard he saw the smoking ruin of a tracked armoured vehicle, fire raging from its engine. Across the debris-strewn road from it, another similar vehicle had been completely buried in rubble from a building hit by the missiles.

Between the two was an armoured personnel carrier, lying on its side, the upper track still revolving, the tread shattered. The tank's multi-laser drooped, useless, its barrel bent beyond repair. Sparks flickered across the undercarriage, and oily black liquid leaked from the cracked carapace.

The liquid slowly crept its way towards the sparking underside, and Vero knew whoever was inside had only moments before the vehicle went up in flames.

'Cover me,' he found himself shouting at a startled Whelan. Vaulting from the window, Vero ran across the open ground, lasgun fire from snipers in the rooftops in the next block following him, spitting up shards of rock behind his feet, and the returning fire from Whelan flickering around his ears.

He leapt onto the track, and propel led himself over the stricken vehicle and into cover. He unsheathed his knife, wedging the point of the blade into the crack between the top of the vehicle and the access hatch. He leaned on the blade, praying it wouldn't break, but the adamantine tip held strong. With a groan of metal, the hatch opened, belching a cloud of hot smoke into the night air. Blinking against the fumes, he peered into the shattered interior.

Slumped against the control was the driver, but he could see immediately that he was beyond help: a supporting strut from the chassis had driven deep into his chest. The gunner was moaning gently, but the blood bubbling from his mouth was arterial red, bright oxygenated blood; he would not last more than a few minutes.

In the darkness beyond he saw a figure, pinned to the floor by a broken stanchion

of metal from the armoured walls of the vehicle. He looked closely. Grey hair, aristocratic eyes, the medals on his chest. He'd seen this man before.

Suddenly memory exploded inside his head like the heart of a star collapsing under its own weight.



HE WAS SITTING at the end of a low bench in a vast echoing hall of highly polished black marble. In front of him, a man dressed in dark robes was reading from a large, leather-bound book. Around them both were banks of humming machinery, dim green screens which flickered with images. He could hear the soft whisper of leather slippers on polished stone. Tech-Priests moved gently through the aisles between the rows of ancient machines, adjusting, taking readings, reciting prayers.

The humming became louder. Gentle hands were placed upon his shoulders, easing him back so that he was lying flat on the warm, padded bench. Above him was a large monitor, and on it he could see the face of a robed man. His face was aged but unlined. The man spoke and his voice, calm and measured, seemed to bypass his ears and speak directly into his brain.

'Averius, Callidus Assassin, relax. Be still and relax.'

The procedure was carefully explained to him in the same mellow tones. 'It is all quite simple, I assure you. A man's mind is made up of two parts. The first part includes memory, your personality, thoughts that are unique to you. Then there is the part which controls your day to day functions, your knowledge of weapons, infiltration, poisons, everything that enables you to function as an assassin, as well as your animal instincts, the fight or flight, your powerful instinct for survival.

'All we are going to do is to temporarily erase the first part, allowing you to get past the normal psychic screening with which the ever-paranoid Governor Torlin surrounds himself. You will have no recollection of who you are, or what your

mission is, so his sanctioned Psyker will have no forewarning of you until it's too late. You are Averius, and so this mission has the code-name Vero.'

A helmet, humming with power, moved down over his head, covering his eyes. He saw faces, scenes of battle, carnage, the rage of guns, and then a face framed by grey hair, eyes full of ambition and a palpable thirst for power. His quarry, Governor Torlin. Images from his own life, past terminations, death throes, passed before his eyes, spooling backwards, and then there was only darkness.



THE VERY NEXT thing he knew he was in a metal comet, falling to earth, his arms bound tightly behind him. Now everything was clear. He was Averius, Callidus Assassin – and he had found his quarry.

Next to the Governor, a terrified-looking elderly man dressed in dark robes looked at him. He muttered softly to himself. Averius leaned over to hear him better.

'You... you are the raven?' the Psyker croaked. 'Why did I not see you? Why could I not read your mind? Why could I not predict your coming?'

Blood trickled from his nose, his breath coming in gasps. The assassin raised his fist.

'Be silent, witch!' he spat, and his hands cut off the old man's questions.

Averius pulled roughly at Torlin, ignoring the man's moans as the broken metal pinning him to the Chimera tore through his flesh. He pulled him out of the vehicle, and dragged him to the building. He felt a wave of heat, as the leaking fuel flooded one of the sparking circuits, and the tank exploded in a ball of molten metal and plastic.

Whelan was waiting for him back in the ruined building, covering his return from the shelter of the ruined window.

'Vero, who is it?' he asked as the assassin stalked back into their crude shelter and flung his prize roughly onto the ground. When there was no answer, Whelan

grabbed his upper arm and swung Averius round to face him.

'Vero, what is it?' he asked, but the assassin looked at him blankly. All previous thoughts of comradeship were erased from the assassin's mind by the full knowledge of his mission.

'You are in my way,' he stated simply. He swung his hand out almost lazily and Whelan was sent flying, knocked unconscious by the force of the blow. The assassin gazed dispassionately at the prone body of his comrade, a look of surprise etched onto the man's unconscious face.

The assassin's fingers began to twitch and shake painfully. He looked down in alarm at the fingertips. He was suddenly wracked with pain, his whole body seeming to lift up and shake itself from deep inside.

Averius could feel the polymorphine flowing through his system, and his body contorted as if it was trying to throw off its skin. He felt himself grow taller, broadening out; his legs straightened, lengthened. From his fingertips he felt a pricking as finely honed steel needles slid out from under his fingernails, razor-sharp and slick with toxic fluids. At last he was complete; the tools of his trade, his raven's claw, hidden to prevent discovery of his mission until he had found his prey.

From behind him, the Governor croaked as he came to. The assassin picked up the water bottle from where it had been lying amidst the rubble on the floor, holding the man's head up to allow him to take a sip of water. Averius wanted his quarry to be able to answer his accuser.

'My lord,' the assassin began, as he always did, 'I come at the express order of the Officio Assassinorum.'

The Governor started into full awareness: his eyes focused, then opened wide with panic.

'The raven,' he croaked. His voice was wild, delirious.

Averius slapped him, lightly, on one ash-grey cheek.

'Wake up. Concentrate. I come to give you the Emperor's absolution.'

'What do you mean? I have done nothing, I have no need of absolution,' Torlin blustered.

The assassin ignored him. 'I have come to bring justice to this planet. You have been watched. Do you think your lapdog telepath could protect you from justice. He knew your thoughts, and his knowledge shone like a beacon to the Adeptus Astra Telepathica. Did you think treachery like yours could be hidden away?'

The Governor was beginning to lose himself to utter panic. The assassin could see sweat starting to bead on the man's ashen forehead. He knew he was a dead man. But confession could at least bring a clean death. Absolution would be swift. The assassin pressed his fingers to the Governor's temples and concentrated his thoughts.

'You thought that you could encourage these rebels, make it possible for them to destroy the Emperor's forces stationed here on your little world.' Averius could barely keep the scorn from his voice. 'Then when they were victorious, you thought you would take your place at their head. Your ambition thought to lead an army across the galaxy, carve yourself your own empire.'

The Governor gazed into the assassin's eyes, and he could see the fires of his betrayal burning. His imagination spiralled out into the vast distance of space. Torlin's mind became full of an unshakeable image: his Emperor and erstwhile master seated on the Eternal Throne of Terra. His heart ached as the assassin forced him to confront his betrayal.

'But why should you not be annihilated along with the rest of your rebellion?' Averius pressed on. 'Death is the easy part. Anyone can die – every day countless thousands die on countless thousands of worlds. As a human being, you are less than nothing. We could have launched a strike from space, bombed your palace, destroyed you in an instant. You would have died without ever knowing why. But as a heretic you are never beneath our notice, and every heretic who dies unrepentant is a failure of orthodoxy. I am here to accept your repentance.'

In the assassin's eyes, Torlin saw the Emperor hold out his hand towards him, saw the hand getting bigger and bigger until it threatened to engulf him. As he watched, it withered, became a claw, a

raven's claw, and then fell to dust.

'You have sinned most grievously against the Emperor, and I am here as his Judge and Executioner. You will die, but you must die repenting your faults.'

The Governor began to weep, great welling tears.

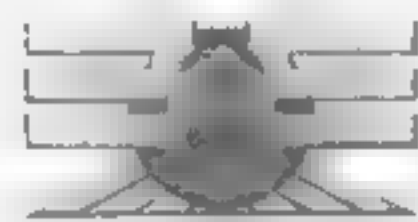
'I repent, I repent,' he wept over and over. Eventually his voice fell to a whisper. 'Forgive me.'

The assassin flexed his fingers, feeling the sharp needles fill with toxins from the bio-engineered pump inside his hand. He turned to the craven Governor.

'Torlin, Imperial Governor of Tadema's World, you have sinned against the Emperor. I accept your repentance and grant you the Emperor's mercy.'

He held the Governor's head still with one hand, cradling as one would a child, and pressed the fingers of the other against the man's face. The needles slid through the soft flesh of the Governor's eyes, piercing nerves and tissue, passing the deadly poison into the man's brain. After a while, the hand holding him up opened and Governor Torlin fell lifeless to the floor.

Absolved.



THE ASSASSIN STROKED his hand over the penal tattoo on his forearm. The letters morphed gently into arcane runes, and he knew that they would transmit a signal through the ether to the Callidus Temple. Far off in space, the Imperium reinforcements, held back until his crucial mission was completed, would swing into action and White Scar Space Marines would start dropping onto the planet. His mission was over, and he could now return for debriefing.

Pressing his thumb against the Governor's forehead, he activated a bio-implant buried deep within his hand. He felt a brief flare of heat, as if he was passing his hand over a lit candle. When he removed the thumb, a mark was burned into the cold skin of the man's head. The stylised mark of a bird. A raven. ●

THE FOREST OF SHADOWS,
ONE OF THE MOST ILL-FAMED
AREAS OF THE EMPIRE AND
HOME TO CHAOS WARBANDS,
TRIBES OF ORCS AND BEASTMEN,
AND MANY OTHER DANGERS.

IT'S ALMOST SUNSET!
YOU SAID YOU WOULD
HAVE COMPLETED THE
TUNNELLING WORK
BEFORE **NIGHTFALL!**

FEW WOULD DARE TRESPASS
WITHIN ITS BORDERS.
FEWER STILL WOULD DARE
DO SO AFTER DARK...

Plot: GORDON REYNOLDS Art: JON
HICKLENTON Letters: DAVID PUGH

AND YOU SAID IT WAS
AN ORC CHIEFTAIN'S TOMB
WE WOULD BE PLUNDERING,
NOT THE BURIAL MOUND
OF SOME DAMNED
SPELL-MUMBLER!

BACKWOODS
SAVAGE!
ARMAND
GOETHE WAS
NO MERE
HEDGEROW
WIZARD...

... HE WAS AMONGST
THE GREATEST **CHAOS**
SORCERERS OF HIS
AGE. LEGENDS SAY HIS
WARBANDS LAID WASTE
TO HALF THE EMPIRE!

REMEMBER, I HAVE PAID
YOU AND YOUR MEN WELL,
AND ALL I WANT IS THIS
GRIMOIRE. A CURSE PROTECTS
THIS TOMB, AND I SEEK THE
SECRETS OF THE BLACK ARTS,
NOT TO PLUNDER BURIAL GOLD.

SECRETS OF
THE BLACK ARTS
BE DAMNED...

THOX!

YOU THINK MY MEN
AND I WILL BE SATISFIED
WITH YOUR SILVER,
WHEN THERE'S A
FORTUNE HERE FOR
THE TAKING?




HERR HAGEN WON'T
BE JOINING US FOR THE
JOURNEY HOME.

WE'LL HAUL AS MUCH
GOLD AS WE CAN CARRY
OUT AND LEAVE HIM
HERE TO ROT BESIDE
THE BONES OF HIS
CHAOS MASTER!




BEST BE
QUICK ABOUT
IT, TOO...




"...IT'S FURTHER THAN I
WOULD LIKE, BUT WITH ANY
LUCK, WE CAN MAKE IT TO
THE FORESTS EDGE BY
NIGHTFALL!"

SIGMAR'S BONES,
GUNTHER! YOU SAID
YOU *KNEW* THESE
WOODS! WE'VE BEEN
WALKING FOR HOURS
NOW AND THIS GOLD
ISN'T GETTING
ANY LIGHTER!

THIS WAS THE TRAIL
WE FOLLOWED IN, I
SWEAR IT WAS...



SOMETHING'S WRONG. THE
TRAIL... IT'S *DIFFERENT*.
IT'S TAKING US *DEEPER*
INTO THE WOODS, NOT
OUT OF THEM...



"WE SHOULD NEVER
HAVE COME HERE! WE
SHOULD NEVER HAVE
DISTURBED THE TOMB
OF A DEAD SORCERER!"

IT'S *THE*
CURSE,
GUNTHER!

TRAILS THAT CHANGE
DIRECTION? DEAD MEN'S
CURSES? THESE ARE
TAILS TO FRIGHTEN
CHILDREN, NOT
GROWN MEN!

YOU ARE BOTH SUPERSTITIOUS
FOOLS. I KNOW THE LEGENDS OF
THIS PLACE, BUT I SAY THERE
IS NOTHING HERE EXCEPT--

THOK!

BEASTMEN!

DRAW YOUR
WEAPONS! DEFEND
YOURSELVES!

GUNTHER SERVED FOR
TWELVE YEARS IN
THE ARMIES OF OSTLAND.
HE HAS FOUGHT
BEASTMEN BEFORE--

THEY ARE DANGEROUS
OPPONENTS, DEPENDING
MORE ON STRENGTH
THAN SKILL--

WOPI!

BUT GUNTHER KNOWS THAT
SKILL AND CUNNING CAN
DEFEAT BRUTE SAVAGERY!



GUNTHER!
HELP ME!

HE ALSO KNOWS
ANOTHER IMPORTANT
FACT ABOUT BEASTMEN--

GUNTHER...!

NINE TIMES OUT OF TEN, THEY'LL STAY
ON THE BATTLEFIELD TO FEED ON
THE INJURED RATHER THAN PURSUE--

SO GUNTHER RUNS. AND IF HE MOURNS,
IT IS NOT FOR HIS FALLEN COMRADES
BUT FOR THE GOLD IN THEIR BACKPACKS
THAT HE WAS FORCED TO LEAVE BEHIND!

HE RUNS FOR HOURS; FOR MORE HOURS THAN
ONE SINGLE NIGHT CAN POSSIBLY LAST, AND
IT IS ONLY THEN THAT HE REALISES THAT THE
LEGENDS ABOUT THIS FOREST ARE TRUE--

THAT THE POWERS OF CHAOS HAVE
TOUCHED THIS BLIGHTED PLACE.

THAT AFTER DARK IN THE FOREST
OF SHADOWS, THE NATURAL ORDER
OF THINGS NO LONGER APPLIES. THAT
TIME STANDS STILL AND THE FOREST
ITSELF CAN COME TO LIFE.



AND THEN HE IS FREE, ALL THOUGHTS
OF THE GOLD HE CAME HERE TO
FIND FORGOTTEN IN HIS TERRIFIED
NEED TO ESCAPE.


RELIEVED, HE REALISES THAT HE RECOGNISES
THIS PLACE. HE IS ON THE EDGE OF THE
FOREST, AND THERE IS A VILLAGE LESS
THAN A LEAGUE FROM HERE.

A VILLAGE. A PLACE OF SAFETY.
BUT HE IS NOT SAFE YET--

-- NOT AS LONG AS HE REMAINS
WITHIN THE BORDERS OF THE FOREST.

NO....
NO!!

NYHAAAAAAA--



FOR AS LONG AS ANYONE CAN REMEMBER, A STRANGE AND SOLITARY TREE HAS GROWN ON THE EDGE OF THE FOREST OF SHADOWS, ON THE ROAD BETWEEN MIDDENHEIM AND SALZENMUND.

TRAVELLERS CALL IT 'GUNTHER'S GRAVE' ALTHOUGH NO-ONE CAN REMEMBER WHY.

ALL THEY KNOW IS THAT IT MARKS THE BORDERS OF THIS DARKEST OF ALL THE FORESTS OF THE EMPIRE. A POINT OF NO RETURN WHICH ONLY THE MOST FOOLHARDY WOULD EVER DARE CROSS...

THE
END



I WILL TELL YOU of Dark Elves. Theirs is a deadly code. Theirs is a malicious beauty. Theirs are the chill lands of Naggaroth. They are captivating, intelligent, an ancient race. And they will murder you slowly with cruel joy in their cold hearts.

Alfredo Tolando, Tilean mercenary & renowned raconteur

Gilead's Fate

by Dan Abnett

THIS LAND IS full of myths and stories. Most of them are foolish prattle. In Munzig, away in the forests, they talk of a magic songbird that haunts the woodland glades, and sings your future in sad trills as it flies from clearing to clearing. Also, if the hour is late, they'll speak of a dark shape that hunkers in the graveyard and eats the marrow from bones living and dead. Nurses and watch-mothers, old guard captains and innkeepers, they are all alike. They keep a store of tales to entertain the children, amaze the passing travellers and intoxicate the locals after hours.

Lilanna was wet-nurse to the Corpath family, wealthy merchants from Munzig. A dumpy woman with silver hair in a bun and starched black clothes, she would tell her stories to the Corpath children at bathtime and before bed. Gleeefully, they would wriggle down and beg for 'just one more'. The best were of the Elves, the pale watchers of the forests, haunters of the glades and waterfalls.

Lilanna had two good stories about Elves. The first was of a tower, the tower of Tor Anrok, which was older than time and lay deep in the forests beyond the town. It only appeared when the moon's light fell upon it, she insisted. She wasn't sure why, to be honest, but it gave the story some charm.

The other was of a pool. Its exact position was not fixed, and that made the details of her yarn easier. The pool was called Eilonthay, and its waters were still

and translucent like glass. In time of need, according to the old woman, the people of Munzig could go down to the pool and beg a wish from the Elves of Tor Anrok. They were bound to help, she said. The dwellers in the moonlit tower had watched over the people of Munzig for centuries. They would answer any call, honestly asked. It was their way.

The children laughed. There were four children in that house: Russ, the eldest, strong and firm; Roder, the joker; Emilon, the golden-haired girl; and little Betsen. The land was full of myths and they loved every one.

As stories go, their fate was better than any innkeeper or wet-nurse could dream up, even in their most salacious moments. Russ was found nailed to the oak-beam ceiling with the other adults of his family; Roder roasted on the hearth. All they ever found of Emilon were some bloody scraps of her golden hair. Lilanna the nurse was cut into five pieces, as were the other servants of the house, piled indiscriminately in the privy. Only Betsen survived. Thirteen years old, she had been away at court in Middenheim, preparing for life as a lady in waiting to the Elector's wife.

She returned for the burials. A pale, silent ghost, she was looked after by the Count at his palace. She spoke to no one.

It was a summer night when she found the pool at last. Two years had passed and, despite her guardian's repeated urgings, she had ridden out most evenings and afternoons, into the emerald glades of

the forest. She believed the tales her old nurse had told her. It was all she had left.

The pool was deep and clear. Translucent. It stood in a glade far off the regular paths, surrounded by twenty solemn larches. She knew it was Eilonthay the moment she came upon it.

Betsen dismounted, pulling her velvet gown close around her. She went to the water's edge and knelt down.

'Elves of Tor Anrok, help me now. I seek vengeance for my family, cruelly slaughtered as sport. Do not turn away from me.'

She knew it was just a myth. But that did not stop her coming, night after night.



HE PUT DOWN his wood axe and knelt. His heart was heavy in his chest. There was the girl again, kneeling by the clear water pool, sobbing out her wishes. How many times had it been? Twenty? Thirty? How many times before he noticed her?

He coiled himself into the trees so he would not be seen, and bit his lip so he would not answer her as honour demanded.

Finally, she stood again and moved back to her waiting horse. A second later, she was gone into the moonlight.

Old Fithvail, last soldier of the tower of Tor Anrok, sighed. It was not right. If he had only been younger, stronger. But he was older, so much older than he might be, and tired. Years and years ago, before that decade-long quest, and the loss... But he was just an ageing Elf warrior, haunting the glades, tending the trees, cutting wood for a small fire, waiting for a quiet death.



THE TOWER Of Tor Anrok was as silent and ruined and secret as ever. Fithvail approached it nervously. It had been his home once, but that had been years before. Then had come that long, long quest, ten years in the doing, and when he had returned, the place had been dead and all life gone.

'Gilead?' he called softly. 'My master...?' he added, cautiously.

Silence. He did not expect an answer.

He found Gilead in the throne room, slumbering in the great gilded chair that had been Cothor Lothain's. The Elf warrior, slim and powerful, lolled in the seat, his longsword dangling from his slack hands. The steel, blue and white, had dulled. Plates of spoiling fruit and meat stood nearby. And empty bottles of wine.

'Gilead?'

Gilead Lothain awoke, shaking off some dreadful dream. 'Fithvail? Old friend?'

'Master.'

'It's been a long time,' Gilead murmured. He reached for a nearby bottle, realised it was empty, and sank back into his seat.

'Twelve months since I last called upon you,' Fithvail admitted.

'And how goes your life?' Gilead asked absently. 'In your little hut out there in the forest? You know there is always room for you here in the Tower.'

'I would not wish to live here anymore,' Fithvail said bitterly, looking about the ruined shell, seeing the grey daylight falling through spaces in the tiles and walls. Broken glass lay under each window. There was a smell of rot and mildew.

'Yet you're here? Why?'

'True to our old pact, the pact with the humans of the town hereabouts, someone has come to the pool and asked for our help. A human girl. Her plight is great.'

Gilead shook his head. 'Those days are gone...'

'Aren't they just?' Fithvail said sourly.

Catching his tone, Gilead looked up, fierce. 'What do you mean?'

'We should help her, lord. It was our way, the way of the old pact that was in place before your late father's time.'

Gilead swore softly and waved Fithrael away.

'I have done my work. Ten years, avenging my brother. I will not stir from here until death comes for me.'

'Your brother would have helped. Galeth would have helped.'

Even before the words were out of his mouth, Fithrael knew he had opened the old wound. He froze, ready for the onslaught.

Gilead got to his feet, unsteadily. The dulled blade dropped from his hand with a clatter.

'You dare to speak to me of that?' he hissed. The hiss turned into a cough. It took a moment for Gilead to recover his voice. 'Galeth was one with me, my brother, my twin! We were one soul in two bodies! Do you not remember?'

Fithrael bowed his head. 'I do, lord. That is what they said of you...'

'And when he died, I was cut in two! Death entered my soul! Ten years! Ten years I hunted for the murderer! Hunted for vengeance! And when I found it, even that pleasure did not slake the pain in my heart!'

Fithrael turned. He would leave now. He could not face this... Then he paused. His heart was pounding in his chest. It surprised him; there was anger in his blood. He turned back again, sharply, fearing what he would see. Gilead still stood, glowering at him.

'I was there too!' he growled at his lord. 'Ten years I stood with you, till the end of the matter! I was the only one of your followers who survived the quest! Did I not suffer too? Did I not give you my all? Did the others die for *nothing*?'

'I meant—' Gilead stammered.

'And look what became of this proud house in your absence! All dead! All gone to dust! The pride of Tor Anrok withered because the son and heir was lost in nowhere, hunting his own pain! The line of Lothain, thrown away for your solace!'

Fithrael was quite sure Gilead would strike him, but he cared not. His master

shook, anger in his eyes, but Fithrael strode towards him, snarling out his words.

'I pity you, master! I have *always* pitied you and mourned your loss! But now... now you *wallow* in pity, waiting for a death that may not come! A warrior of your mettle, indolent and wasting away when others may benefit from your skills! You may crave death, but why not use what life you have to aid others? That was always our way! Always!'

'Get out!' Gilead screamed, shaking with anger. He kicked wretchedly at the plates and bottles that littered the floor around his throne. 'Get out!' He stooped and snatched up a bottle from the ground and flung it at his oldest friend.

It missed by a yard and shattered. Fithrael did not flinch. He stalked away out of the hall.



FOUR DAYS PASSED. Gilead Lothain knew little of them. He slept, or drank; hurling the empty bottles out through the broken windows of the hall, watching them smash and glitter on the yard outside. Pain thumped in his skull. Pain that could be neither unloosed or fettered. Now and then, he would howl at the night sky.

Dawn came, waking him. He was lying at the foot of the his father's gilt throne, dirty and cold. The pain in his mind was so great, it took a few moments for him to realise that it was not the pale light that had woken him. It was the croak of ravens.

Unsteadily, he walked out into the tower yard. Ravens lined the walls, dark, fluttering, rasping. Many others circled overhead. Occasionally, one would drop down and peck at the huddled form on the flagstones of the gatehouse.

'Gods of my father...' Gilead stammered as he realised what the shape was.

Fithrael was almost dead cold. Terrible wounds had sliced his old armour, and

blood caked his body and arms. Gilead drove off the carrion birds and cradled him. The Elf's eyes winced open.

'Who has done this?' Gilead murmured. 'What have *you* done, old friend?'

Fithrael seemed unable to talk.

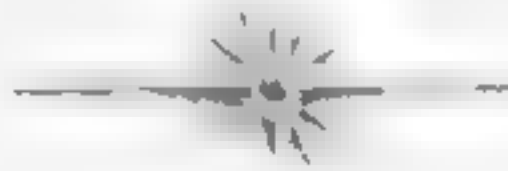
'Have you... have you shamed me, Fithrael? Did you go to help this human girl?'

Fithrael nodded weakly.

'You stubborn old fool!' Gilead cursed.

'M-me? S-stubborn?' Fithrael managed.

Gilead lifted him up and carried him into the tower.



THE WALLED TOWN of Munzig lay in the patchwork of Border Principalities south of the Empire in the forests below the Black Mountains, a steep, gabled, timbered place surrounded by high curtain walls. Lofty and proud, the Count of Munzig's palace stood on a promontory of rock above the market town, commanding good views of the River Durich and the forest tracks rising beyond to Black Fire Pass.

Betsen Corpath had lived at the palace for two whole years, since her return, since the funerals. She had rooms in the west wing, where for months she had done nothing but slumber uneasily and weep. The palace staff worried about her. Fifteen years old and yet far older in her bearing and mind. Pain does that to a person. Pain and grief.

After a year at the palace, she started to request books to be brought to her, and she would go out into the town and renew acquaintances with those that had known her lost family. In the evenings, she liked to sit in the Count's herb garden and read.

That particular evening, the scents of the garden were thick and heady around her, and her book lay unopened on the bench at her hip. The ancient one, the strange Elf warrior with his kind eyes and soft voice who had appeared to her by

the pool, had promised her so much, yet she had heard nothing. She was beginning to believe she had dreamt it all. Another night, then she would slip away from the palace after Nones and ride to the pool again.

A breeze swayed the thick lavender and marjoram around her. An evening chill was settling. She was about to rise and go in when she realised there was a figure behind her. A tall, lean form, just a shadow, was watching her.

She gasped and started up. 'Who—'

The figure stepped into the light. At first she thought the ancient Elf had returned. But it was not him. Where her mysterious guardian had been kind and unthreatening, this one was lean and powerful, and his noble, pale face was cruel and unsettling. His alien gaze burned into her. He was cloaked, and beneath she saw intricate armour. He was like a creature from a dream.

He spoke, in a musical language she did not understand. Then he spoke again, tutting softly to himself. 'Of course. I must use the vulgar, leaden human tongue. Are you Betsen Corpath?'

Despite herself, she nodded. 'Who are you?'

'I am Gilead Lothain, last of my line. I was told you came to Eilonthay and asked for my kind to help you.'

Again, she nodded. 'An older warrior answered me and told me he would render aid,' she began. 'I do not understand why—'

He hushed her. 'Fithrael is a brave soul, but his fighting years are passed. He has asked me to take on your errand and complete it.'

'I-I thank you for it,' she said, still nervous.

'Collect your things, a mount, and slip out of the palace at darkfall. I will meet you outside the city gate.'

'Why? Can't you just—'

'Your quest is one of vengeance, as I have been told it. I know all about vengeance. You must come with me.'

She blinked, struggling to form another question.

But he had gone.

IN THE DARK TREES a hundred yards from the gate, he was waiting, sat astride a slender warhorse. Betsen rode up to him until they met under the limbs of an old elm that sighed in the night breeze.

'Am I dreaming this?' she asked.

'Humans often dream of my kind because they don't believe they exist. But I do exist. I live. Of that much, at least, I am sure. Let us begin.'



THE GIRL WAS bright and sharp-witted, and that surprised Gilead, who had never been much impressed with the mental dexterity of humans. Not that he'd had much truck with them over the years. When she told him of the crime against her family, of the dreadful murder done, he felt an ache of sympathy that also surprised him. Once she had told of the murders, she was silent for a long while. Gilead found himself watching her. She was fifteen, young even by the miserably short human timescale, but pretty, in that blunt, crude, human way.

Then she began to tell him what she had found out in the two years since the crime. For the third time he was impressed. It must have taken a great deal of wit and ingenuity, not to mention courage, to tease out this intelligence. These were the facts as she knew them, and as she had told Fithvael, the facts that had sent him off to his cruel defeat. She repeated them now to Gilead.

There was a merchant lord called Lugos, who dwelt in an old mansion maybe ten miles beyond Munzig. He was old and very rich – as rich as the Count himself, some said; richer still, said others. In fact, no one could account for the way a merchant, even a prosperous, successful man like Lugos, could have amassed quite such a fortune. He had ambitions too, courtly ones. The Borders could always stand another count, another prince.

The most whispered rumours said that Lugos had crossed into the Darkness, that he had dabbled in forces he did not understand and should have not unlocked. That he was a sorcerer, married to evil. No one had proof. No one, except perhaps Betsen herself, had even dared to find any. Lugos was a respectable man, a powerful man. He had a personal militia that rivalled the standing garrisons of some small towns. His mansion was a fortress. He had the ear of powerful men at Court.

Betsen knew that her father, who had been an up and coming merchant, had entered into business with Lugos in an attempt to increase his trade. Lugos had nurtured him, as all good merchant lords do when they find an eager trade partner. Betsen believed that in the course of this business dealing, her father had learned a little too much about Lugos... and Lugos had decided to silence him. And he had done it in the bestial manner his unholy masters had determined.



THE MANSION WAS a stronghold indeed; a great blackstone building with good walls and picket towers along the perimeter.

Gilead watched the place from the cover of the treeline. He did not need solid proof of the evil within, not in the way humans seemed to need. He could *feel* the vile filth of the place oozing out at him. If he had found this place under other circumstances, he would not have needed the girl's urgings to feel the need to destroy it. It was an affront to the nature of the world.

'Stay here,' he told the human girl, handing her a small crossbow. 'I will send for you when the time comes. This device is loaded. Aim carefully and squeeze this if you need to. But I think you will not be so troubled. I will keep them busy.'

'Alone?' she asked.

'Alone,' the Elf agreed, eyes dark in the

shadows. 'I will deal with them alone.'

'I meant me,' she returned, caustically.

'You'll be safe,' he repeated, catching her tone in surprise. She was sharp, sharper than he expected of a mere human.

He made to ride on, but she stopped him. 'Your... Fithvael? He told me about you. About your pain and loss and... what you have been through.'

'He shouldn't have done that,' Gilead said, slanting eyes dark and unfathomable. 'It was not a human concern.'

'He told me so I would understand why he was undertaking my quest and not his master, the great warrior.'

Gilead was silent.

'I understand,' she said hurriedly. 'I understand your pain was so great you had no desire to become involved in another's pain. What... what changed your mind?'

'I was reminded of the old duty my kind chose to take up. That changed my mind.'

'He said you wanted only to die.'

'I do.'

'But he also said he thought you should be using your life to help others until death came.'

'He said a *lot*, didn't he?'

She smiled. 'I suppose he did. Are you embarrassed?'

'No,' he lied, hiding his feelings in the lumpen human language.

'I think he was right, anyway. Even a life of pain is not worth wasting. Don't you think?'

'Perhaps... I am here, am I not?' Gilead said after a pause.

'So what will you do with your life after this is ended?'

Gilead spurred his horse on. 'First,' he answered, 'I will see if there is to *be* a life after this has ended.'



THE BLADE OF his knife was dulled with charcoal so that the moonlight would not catch it. It went through four throats and spiked in between the back-plates of three cuirasses as his tight left hand stifled cries. By midnight he was over the main wall, a shadow running the length of the ditch towards the mansion itself.

There was a high window above the inner dyke. Pausing to hide as another guard went past, Gilead unslung a silken rope and with a deft throw looped its end over a waterchute. The stone of the wall was black and sheer, wet with slime and lichen. His feet found every toe-hold as his arms slid him upwards.

On the ledge of the window, he recoiled his rope and drew his longsword. Below him, in the hall, he could hear singing and merrymaking, the croon of viols and pipes, the clink of glasses.

'Now...' he breathed, and dropped inside.



HE LANDED IN the middle of the main table. The crash brought the merrymaking to a sudden halt. There were thirty in the hall: nobles, woman, servants, warriors and musicians. They all stared in dismay at the armed ranger in their midst.

At the head of the table sat Lugos, a withered old human in yellow robes. He smiled.

'Another Elf?' he chuckled. 'Two in one week. I am honoured.' He nodded to his men, who were scrambling up and drawing weapons. The servants and woman backed away in fear. 'Let's see if we can't kill this one outright. I'd hate for him to get away and bleed to death in the woods like the last one.'

Gilead was transfixed by the cruel glee in Lugos's face.

They rushed him. But you cannot rush one who is suddenly shadowfast. Gilead was abruptly in a dozen places, his sword

whispering as it scythed. Two dropped, then four more. There were screams and cries, the clatter of falling weapons, the patter of blood.

Lugos frowned, observing the slaughter before him. He turned to his aide, who stood quaking at his side. 'Wake Siddroc.'

'But master...!'

'Wake him, I say! This one is a devil...much more than that last old fool! Wake Siddroc or we're all finished!'

Gilead cut left, thrust right. He severed a sword arm and decapitated another fighter to his rear. Blades whirled around him like grouse beaten from cover. Some broke against his flashing longsword like shattered mirrors. Others rebounded blocked, and then the longsword stabbed in under loosened guards.

Gilead rejoiced. It had been so long, so long since he had felt fire, felt purpose. His sword arm, his warrior soul, had slept. He spun again, cut, thrust, sliced. And they were all done.

Gilead turned, eyes bright, sword red, and faced Lugos down the length of the long table. The only sounds were the spitting of the logs in the fireplace, the moans of the not-quite dead and the gurgle of a spilled wine flagon as it drained.

'You are Lugos?' Gilead said.

'I do hope so,' the human said calmly, 'or else you've made a terrible mess in someone else's hall... Elf.' He spat the word as if were a curse.

Gilead stepped forward. 'Speak before you die. Confess the nature of your crimes.'

'Crimes? What proof do you have? Believe me, Elf, the very best of the Empire will hound you out for this affront to my estate. The White Wolves, the Knights Panther... you will be hunted and torn apart as a murderer.'

'Such things do not scare me. I can smell the evil here. I know you are a dabbler in the black ways. I know your crimes. Will you confess them before I make you pay?'

Lugos raised his glass and sipped. To Gilead he seemed almost supernaturally calm for one of his short-lived, frantic

race. 'Hmmm, let's see... as a young merchant, I travelled far and dealt with many traders, dealing in many fine objects. One day, a necklace came into my possession. It was finely wrought and very old, the crafting of some ancient place. Liking the look of it, I placed it around my neck!'

Lugos's face grew dark. 'It was cursed. Cursed by the dark gods of Chaos. At once, I was in their thrall.' He pulled open his tunic and showed Gilead the metal tracers buried within scar tissue around his throat.

Gilead remained silent.

'You see, I have no choice. I deserve some sympathy, don't you think?'

Still Gilead said nothing.

'There's more ... Since I was cursed I have ordained countless human sacrifices, murdered dozens of innocents, arranged the foul deaths on any who stood in my way--'

'You are a monster!' Gilead said plainly.

'Indeed I am!' Lugos agreed with a hearty laugh. 'What's more, I am a monster who has been *keeping you talking...*'

The doors at the end of the hall behind the merchant burst open. A snuffling giant shambled in: a huge, inhuman thing clad from head to foot in barbed green armour the colour of a stagnant pool.

Gilead froze. Raw evil emanated from the creature. Its visor was pushed back and it appeared to be eating, its great jaws chewing on bloody gobs of flesh. A rank smell filled the room.

'This is Siddroc,' Lugos said. 'He's my friend. My *guardian*. My dark masters provided him to keep me safe.' He looked round at the vast creature and tutted melodramatically. 'Oh, Siddroc! Have you eaten another of my aides? I've *told* you about that!' The creature turned its huge head and snarled. 'Very well... this intruder has caused me a great deal of trouble. Dispose of him and I'll give you all the flesh you can eat.'

With a reverberating growl, the creature shambled forward, casting aside the last scraps of the unfortunate aide. In his right hand he whirled a chain bearing a

spiked ball the size of Gilead's head. In his left hand he held a curved cutter-blade that surrounded his meaty knuckles with spikes.

Gilead leapt clear as the first blow came down and demolished the table. The Elf landed and rolled aside hastily as another shattered the flagstones where he had been sprawled. For all its huge size, the abomination was fast. The Elf side-stepped another huge blow and cut in with his own, but the longsword rebounded from the creature's armoured shoulder with a ringing chime.

The thing called Siddroc caught Gilead off balance with a sideways chop, and the flat of the cutter blade sent him flying, blood spraying from a slice to his jawline. He landed hard in the hearth, crushing two viols that the musicians had left there in their haste to leave. He barely had time to get up and clear before the spiked ball destroyed a bench and the iron fireguard.

Gilead leapt forward again, trying to find some opening. This time, his sword caught the cutter blade and broke, leaving him with about a foot of jagged steel. The creature started baying – laughing perhaps, it was impossible to tell – and charged the Elf.

Gilead thought fast. He faced certain death unless he tried to evade. But death... death was what he *wanted*. He could do anything. Even if he failed, he would still be rewarded with the thing he most craved. Calm swept through him.

Gilead did what Siddroc least expected. He met the charge head on. The jagged end of the longsword stabbed into the visor slit of Siddroc's vast helm. There was a pneumatic pop and a crack of bone, and stinking black ichor spurted out of the neck seals. With a monstrous scream, the great creature toppled.

Gilead rose unsteadily, from the great, twitching corpse. Once again, he noted darkly, death had chosen to take his side. He looked around. Lugos was gone.



GILEAD CAUGHT up with him in the main yard of the mansion. The gates were open, and the servants were fleeing, taking whatever they could with them in their panic. Gilead ignored the humans as easily as if they were gnats.

Lugos was face down in the dirt, impaled by a crossbow bolt. Betsen stood over him.

'That's him isn't it?' she asked the Elf, her whole body shaking.

'Yes,' he replied simply. 'And that is your vengeance served.'

She looked up at him, tears in her eyes. 'Thank you... but it doesn't feel anything like enough.'

'It never does,' said Gilead Lothain.



ANOTHER DAWN, and Gilead threw the flaming torch in through the gateway of Tor Anrok. In a moment, flames roared up and began to claw at the ancient stonework, rip through the creepers and flare out of the window spaces. Smoke filled the cool morning air, carrying lumps of ash. Gilead walked away as fire engulfed the tower, expunging his past. He reached his horse, laden with equipment and the few precious mementoes he had decided to save.

On his own horse, to one side, Fithrael watched him, leaning low in the saddle to ease the ache of his healing wounds.

'I never thought...' he began.

Gilead swung up into his own saddle and took the ancient Elf's hand. 'The past is dead, Fithrael. It's over. You showed me that much. I do not know what I have in my future, but I will make the best of it until I find death at last.'

'Then let me ride with you until that day dawns,' Fithrael said.

They spurred away into the morning mist. Behind them, Tor Anrok shuddered and collapsed into itself, vanishing for the last time, into flame and billowing soot. Two thousand years of history consumed. By the time the smoke had cleared, the riders were long gone. ●



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HONOUR •

MORE OF THE WORTHY HEROES WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS ISSUE OF *INFERNO!*

SIMON

JOWETT wonders if there's anything left to say about himself that his ex-wife hasn't already said. Work-shy, promiscuous (he'll write anything for money), he has written scripts for the comic book incarnations of James Bond and Young Indiana Jones, among many others, and is currently writing scripts for animation, short stories and children's novels. He loves the novels of Jeff Noon, the wines of Spain and wears Paul Smith, Katherine Hamnett and party-girl Jenny as often as his busy schedule allows.

JONATHAN

CURRAN left college with an English Literature degree, but soon realised that no-one cares what you think about Renaissance poetry. He got a job on a magazine, which wasn't as glamorous as he thought it would be, but also did a stint as a film reviewer, which was. He now works on Competitions and Events for *SHE Magazine*, and lives in London with his girlfriend and his CD collection. He's been writing fiction for as long as he can remember, and divides his spare time between writing fantasy, short stories and working on his first novel.



Jon Curran looking mysterious

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Gaunt's Ghosts: The Hollows of Hell, by Dan Abnett

Colonel Colm Corbec of the Tanith First led his squad down the ramp of the troopship. They reached the first line of cover, a punctured length of pipeline running along rusted pylons, and dropped down. 'Where's Commissar Gaunt?' Corbec growled.

Trooper Raglon looked up from the voxcaster. 'It looks pretty certain the Commissar's troop ship was one of those vaporised in the storm. We was lucky we got down before it really started.'

Corbec shivered. He didn't feel lucky.

Hell in a Bottle, by Simon Jowett

'Ilium iss oursss! Our tasssk here iss complete!' The words of Kargon, Seed-Bearer of Chaos, rang out across the glassy plain. The Chaos army had travelled from every continent, every shattered city, every ruined sector of Ilium to gather on this patch of desert that had once been the control centre of the Imperial garrison. The sand beneath their feet had been scorched, melted and fused by a final, futile act of suicidal defiance: the detonation of the garrison's remaining nuclear stockpile. But within Kargon's soul, an unaccustomed sensation gnawed at the edges of his awareness. Hunger.

The Raven's Claw, by Jonathan Curran

Under the palace, the Governor's personal liveried Chimera armoured personnel carrier stood waiting. The Governor and his Psyker, Rosarius, climbed in and the driver sealed the hatch behind them. To Rosarius it sounded like the closing of a coffin. Suddenly, the Psyker sprang bolt upright, his eyes crazy with fear. 'My lord!' he exclaimed. 'I see fire, fire from the sky!'

The comm link from the lead vehicle screamed, 'Incoming, incoming!' The explosion drowned out the rest of the voice.

Gilead's Fate, by Dan Abnett

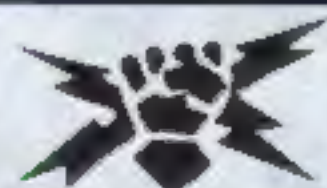
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United Kingdom
Games Workshop Ltd,
Willow Road,
Lenton,
Nottingham
NG7 2WS

Australia
Games Workshop Ltd,
23 Liverpool Street,
Ingleburn
NSW 2565

USA
Games Workshop Inc,
6721 Baymeadow Drive,
Glen Burnie, Maryland
21060-6401

Canada
Games Workshop Ltd,
1645 Bonhill Road,
Units 9-11,
Mississauga,
Ontario
L5T 1R3



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